Riddles in the Light Princess Charlie Morningstar vs. Alastor the Radio Demon
By Yu May

[Author's note: this story was written as part of an art trade with Lilac-Blaze, who provided the direction of the story, along with feedback. It is based directly on the events of *Hazbin Hotel* (Season 1, Episode 7, "Hello, Rosie") and imagines an alternative version of events. It is possible for the story to be read on its own, and still be understandable. The first scene of this story draws directly from the relevant episode to provide the full context.]

Chapter 1: The Riddle Game

> Suddenly, like a thing that leaped to him across infinite distances with the speed of light, desire (salt, black, ravenous, unanswerable desire) took him by the throat. The merest hint will convey to those who have felt it the quality of the emotion which now shook him, like a dog shaking a rat: for others, no description perhaps will avail. Many writers speak of it in terms of lust: a description admirably illuminating from within, totally misleading from without. It has nothing to do with the body. But it is in two respects like lust as lust shows itself to be in the deepest and darkest vault of its labyrinthine house. For like lust, it disenchants the whole universe.
> —C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, Chapter VII

Princess Charlie Morningstar lay in her bed, sobbing. Two of her imps, Razzle and Dazzle, tried to comfort her, but she brushed them aside. Her plan had failed. The exorcists were coming to decimate the population of Hell, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Her best friend, Vaggie, had been exposed as an angel, and not just any angel, but a former exorcist, who'd participated in the extermination campaigns for years, before she fell from Heaven.

All Charlie wanted was someone she could trust, someone like Vaggie. But how *stupid* was she not to have realized it sooner? In all their years together, Vaggie had never trusted Charlie enough to tell her who she really was.

With a wisp of black smoke, Alastor the Radio demon appeared at the side of her bed, smiling casually. "Oh, Charlie, you look an absolute mess."

Charlie hid under her covers. "Ugh, go away, Alastor."

Alastor seated himself on the mattress. "Now, now, is that any way to act after picking a fight with all of Heaven and dooming everyone you love?"

Charlie threw off the covers to glare at Alastor. "I have enough on my mind without hearing your sadistic idea of a joke, asshole."

Flopping down against her pillow, Charlie twisted to hide her face from Alastor, only for him to appear on the opposite side of her bed, lying right next to her under the blankets. "Who's joking?"

With a squeal, Charlie jumped, and fell off her own bed. Alistor peered over the edge of the bed. “You have a captive audience downstairs waiting to hear what kind of inspiring performance you have planned next.”

Charlie rubbed her skull. “Ugh, I can't. How can I face them after failing them all so hard? They came here to be saved and all I gave them was more pain.”

As she started tearing up, Charlie stood and began to pace back and forth. “I'm just as bad as the cruelest Overlord in Hell. And maybe worse. At least they don't go around giving false hope.”

As he listened, Alastor rolled onto his stomach, kicking his legs in the air behind him like a teenage girl. “Well, I never expected to see such a miserable display of self-loathing from you.”

“Oh, fuck you, Alastor.”

Completely unbothered, Alastor rolled onto his side.

Charlie jabbed a finger at him. “All you do is stand there, smiling while you watch us struggle and fail. I don't know how you can enjoy all this suffering so much.”

Asastor stood, and wrapped his fingers around Charlie’s shoulder, chuckling. “Ha! Just because you see a smile, don't think you know what's going on underneath.”

Using both his index fingers, Alastor pressed Charlie’s face to force her to smile. “A smile is a valuable tool, my dear. It inspires your friends, keeps your enemies guessing, and ensures that no matter what comes your way, you're the one in control.”

“...But I'm not.”

Charlie pulled away from Alastor and approached her bedroom window. “...I'm the farthest thing from in control. The person I trust most has been lying to me for years. Heaven refuses to listen.”

Charlie thumped both fists against the window. “Even if they did, I can't prove the hotel works. Adam has an invincible exorcist army pointed right at my doorstep and there's nothing I can do…about any of it!”

The lights in the room dimmed, and Alistor’s grin winded. His teasing, sing-song voice became strangely childish. “I know something you don't know.”

“Huh?”

Alastor grabbed Charlie by the arms. “Those big, scary angels are not quite as indestructible as they seem.”

Then he turned away, leaving Charlie looking befuddled. “What are you talking about?”

“Just that you and your little band of misfits might stand more of a chance than you think.”

Charlie rushed to stop Alastor from leaving her. “How? I'll do anything.”

Alastor held out a hand for Charlie to shake. “Anything? Then... let's make a deal.”

Charlie stared at his outstretched hand. “You... You want my soul?”

Alastor sneered, his eyes fixed on Charlie. “Your soul?”

Then he blinked, and his smile became bright and friendly. “Heavens, no. All I need from you is one itty-bitty favor. What's a favor between friends?

Charlie swallowed. “I won't hurt anyone for you.”

“Who's asking! One favor, at a time of my choosing, where you harm no one. In return, I tell you what I know. Do we have a deal?”

Razzle and Dazzle both flew to Charlie's side, growling, but Charlie held them back. As she held out her hand, she suddenly began to transform, revealing her own devilish horns.

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A hush fell over the Hazbin Hotel, and Vaggie froze as she sensed the presence of devilish magic. “No. No!”

Vaggie stormed to Charlie’s bedroom and thrust the doors open. As his hand closed on Charlie’s, Alastor twisted to sneer at the fallen angel. “Right on cue!”

Vaggie snarled. “What did you do? Let her go!”

Then, instead of shaking Alastor’s hand, Charlie snatched his arm and slapped him sharply across the wrist with her free hand. “No deal! I’m not falling for that. My daddy warned me about guys like you! He always says, ‘Charlie, all men are snakes. They only want one thing from you, and they’ll lie through their teeth to get you to trust them!”

Vaggie blinked. “Uh, Charlie? I think your dad was talking about something else?”

Alastor scowled as he rubbed the back of his wrist, then fixed his smile. “Well, if it’s no deal, I’d hate to waste any more of your precious time. You have so little to spare.”

As Alastor turned away, Charlie grabbed his sleeve. “Wait! How about…a counter-deal?”

Vaggie grabbed Charlie by her sleeve. “No, Charlie! Don’t play his game!”

Alastor turned his head, slowly. “Do go on.”

Charlie stood at attention, glancing nervously around the room, before shaking her head at Vaggie. “Uh, instead of a deal…how about…a game! Just a harmless little game…between friends? But if I win, you agree to help us!”

Alastor narrowed his eyes. “A game’s no fun at all unless we *both* have something at stake. What happens if I win?”

Charlie swallowed, and chose her words carefully. “Well, suppose I agree to…do chores for you?”

Alastor licked his lips. “You mean, you’ll do as I say? Like a slave?”

The only thing that stopped Vaggie from tackling Alastor was Charlie’s hand gently nudging her back. Charlie forced a smile. “Um…sure! But maybe, less like a servant, and more like…an employee? I’ll remain completely free to act according to my conscience, and won’t be under any obligation to follow your orders, unless it is by my own free will!”

Alastor stroked his chin. “That sounds no different than my volunteering as manager for your little Hotel project. I’m under no obligations to you, and I can leave any time I want. What’s the benefit in such an *informal* arrangement?”

Charlie took a steadying breath. “All right, let’s say I can’t back out of the arrangement any time I want. I’ll be free to obey, or disobey your orders…but I’ll at least be obligated to listen to your instructions. Surely, a man with your talents could find a way to profit from putting me to work?”

“Suppose I order you to march to the kitchen and make me a sandwich. Will you serve me, obediently? Or would that ‘violate your conscience’?”

Charlie grimaced, before forcing a wider smile. “Um…if all you’re asking me to do is make a simple sandwich, and not hurt anyone with it, then sure! I’ll make you a sandwich?”

Alastor licked his lips. “How charming. Reminds me of the old days working my way up at the radio station. Just to warn you, I run a tight ship! For example…let’s say you do a poor job making your first sandwich, or drop it by mistake? If I’m displeased with your work, will you agree to accept…punishment?”

Vaggie put a foot forward, partially shielding Charlie, but Charlie brushed her aside to face Alastor. “You mean you can torture me?”

Alastor shook his head. “Oh, nothing so gouache. Just a simple spanking should do. That’s a suitable punishment for a silly, naughty girl, who made a mess in the kitchen. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Charlie folded her hands behind her back. “If that’s really all it is…then yes, I’d submit to a spanking…if I agree I deserve it.”

Vaggie shook her head. “Charlie! What are you thinking?”

Alastor strode toward Charlie, extending his hand. “She’s thinking quite clearly. Instead of offering me her *soul*, she’s offering up…her *pride*. It’s absolutely delicious! I think we have a deal.”

Vaggie blocked Charlie’s hand. “No! This isn’t fair! Charlie, you’re offering him way too much! How do we know he’ll keep his word?”

“I thought you’d understand, angel. My deals are a matter of personal honor. I *always* keep my promises.”

Charlie held out her hand. “Then you should have the same stakes as me. If I win, you don’t just tell us what you know. You agree to *officially* join the Hazbin Hotel, as my employee, not a volunteer.”

Alastor pulled back his hand, delicately. “For how long? A month? A year?”

Charlie’s face was firm. “Let’s say seven years. And the same goes for me.”

Vaggie ran her fingers through her hair. “This is insane! Why are you doing this?”

“Alastor knows a way to kill angels. This is the only way I can stop the next Extermination.”

Vaggie’s eyes widened. “But... I–I didn't even know that was possible.”

Charlie frowned. “If you did, would you have told me?”

“Charlie, I–”

Alastor slammed his cane against the floor. “Goodness! You’re a hard negotiator, *Princess* Morningstar. I imagine Vaggie taught you that. You’re so lucky to have someone by your

side…some one you can trust to have your back! But for such high stakes…I will play on one condition: I get to choose the game."

Vaggie shoved forward to face Alastor. "No way! You're up to something! You'll cook the rules so Charlie can't win."

Charlie grabbed Vaggie's hand and pulled her back. "Vaggie! This is my decision, not yours…Alastor, whatever game we play, you can't cheat."

Alastor put a hand to his heart. "You wound me. The game will be a simple test of wits: The Riddle Game. You have my word: the rules will be perfectly fair. It will be impossible for me to cheat…"

Alastor pulled a small hourglass out of his breast pocket, glanced at it lovingly, then stuffed it back.

Then, with a relaxed look on his face, Alastor extended his hand, but Charlie only stared at his hand, looking skeptical. "The riddle game? You mean, we'll just ask each other a bunch of questions?"

"Not just any question. A riddle has to have an *answer*, one that can be deduced through reason. If a question relies on knowledge that is impossible for the other person to have, that question is forbidden. For example…'What am I thinking, right now?'"

As Alastor asked the question, his face suddenly changed. His pupils shrank, and with a flourish of hellfire, stitched scars appeared across his face, before he instantly returned to normal. "That would be considered an illegal riddle, because you can't possibly deduce the answer. A question is legal, if–and *only* if–it is *possible* for you to find a correct answer to the question, *rationally*…"

Alastor kept his hand extended, but Charlie didn't return the gesture. Alastor wrinkled his nose, his smile unchanging. "...Tell you what, Charlie, I'll sweeten the deal. If you agree to play with me, I promise to help you answer your little question about how to kill an angel, win or lose. In other words…"

Hellfire engulfed Alastor's palm, and his scars reappeared. "…you *literally* can't lose."

Charlie grabbed his hand, and shook it. "Deal."

Vaggie shouted, "No!" and snatched at Charlie's wrist, but with a flurry of smoke, the room rearranged itself. Suddenly, Charlie and Vaggie were seated at an ornate table and chairs. Alastor sat across from them, as if preparing for a cozy tea party. They were still in Charlie's room, but the air around them seemed to billow from the greenish flames.

Alastor waved a hand, and a small hourglass appeared. “I have all the time in the world, but since you ladies are in a hurry, I’ll speed this up. We’ll each have six minutes to complete a turn. Plenty of time to puzzle out a nasty riddle, but short enough to keep your mind focused. To avoid a draw, failure to answer a single question in time will *instantly* end the game.”

Charlie took a shaky breath, trying to ignore the thick stench of black smog. “That…that rule gives an unfair advantage to the person who goes first.”

Alastor pulled a silver dollar from his pocket, and flipped it. “Precisely, so we will have a coin toss. It’s the only fair way to determine who–”

Before Alastor could catch the coin, Vaggie snatched it out of the air and examined it. “Oh, no you don’t! It’s a trick coin, or–”

She turned it back and forth in her hand, but found nothing strange. Alastor sighed. “Good catch. A con-artist might use a double-sided coin, or determine the answer by using his sense of touch. That’s why you always ask the other person to call the flip…for a *fair* coin toss. Charlie, it’s your call. Vaggie, be a lamb and flip for us.”

Charlie and Vaggie glanced at one another, with a mix of terror and annoyance. Charlie cleared her throat. “I call heads.”

Vaggie flipped the coin, and slapped it against the back of her wrist. “It’s heads.”

Alastor smiled again, but there was no hint of the smile in his eyes. “This must be your lucky day! Oh, and by the way, you ladies feel free to chat amongst yourselves. I don’t mind at all! The timer for my turn will start the moment Charlie finishes asking me her question, assuming it’s a *fair* riddle, of course…and Charlie, you may, of course, ask Vaggie for help, if you’re stuck.”

Charlie and Vaggie hesitated, before twisting their chairs around and whispering to each other in hushed voices. Vaggie looked like she was resisting the urge to shake Charlie by the shoulders. “Are you crazy! You walked right into his trap!”

Charlie scowled. “Hey! I know exactly what I’m doing. I *loved* riddle books when I was a kid.”

“And if you lose? What then?”

Charlie glanced furtively back at Alastor, before clutching her bottom. “Then…then I spend eternity doing mundane household chores, and probably get spanked if I don’t do a good job. But at least we’ll have a hope of surviving what’s coming! Now, are you gonna help me, or do you just want to lecture me?”

Vaggie pinched her brow. “All right, all right! Since you go first, this is your best chance to knock him out early. Just hit him with your best shot, right off the gate!”

Charlie nodded. “Got it! All right, Alastor, get ready…”

Charlie turned and slammed the table, and started to recite a poem from memory:
“As I was going to Saint Ives,
I met a man with seven wives,
The seven wives had seven sacks,
The seven sacks had seven cats,
The seven cats had seven kits:
Kits, cats, sacks, and wives…
How many were there going to Saint Ives?”

As the hourglass floated in the air and set itself back on the table, Alistair leaned back in his chair. “One.”

Charlie drummed her fingers. “Uh…yeah, there was one *man*. Then there’s his seven wives–”

“The trick of the riddle is to deceive the listener into calculating the total number of objects mentioned in each line. Counting kits, cats, sacks, and wives, that total would come to 2,800, plus one for the husband with the seven wives. But the very first verse gives the *true* answer. ‘As *I* was going to Saint Ives.’ Only the hidden narrator is traveling to Saint Ives. In other words…you, Charlie.”

Alastor stroked a finger along the hourglass. “I did so love that one, when I was a boy. Now, it’s my turn…”

Alastor waved his hand, and suddenly, a shadowy image of a man and woman appeared in thin air standing across from a monstrous creature with the head of a bull. The images resembled the decorative pottery of Ancient Greece.

As Alastor narrated his riddle, the billowing smoke shaped itself to illustrate the words of his tale. “There once was a great hero, by name of Theseus, who dared to brave the labyrinth of King Minos of Crete, and challenge the monstrous minotaur, which had killed many of the innocent children of Athens. But King Minos’ daughter, Princess Ariadne, took pity on Theseus, and offered him a ball of thread, so that he could escape the impossible maze. With her help, Theseus slew the minotaur, and returned to his home in Athens as a hero, commanding a great ship of thirty oars.”

The shadowy images shifted, and all that was left was an image of the great ship, docked to harbor. “To honor his deeds, the Athenians preserved the Ship of Theseus, but as the wooden planks of the ship began to decay, they were forced to replace them, gradually. And as the centuries passed, every single piece of the Ship of Theseus rotted away, and had to be replaced with new, strong timber. And so, the philosophers of Athens became divided by this question:

was the ship still the same ship that had belonged to Theseus? For how could it truly be called the Ship of Theseus, if every last piece of his ship had rotted away…"

As the image of the shop rotted away, then reassembled itself, over and over again, Alastor snapped his fingers, and it vanished completely. "What do you think, Charlie? Any valid answer will do."

Charlie twiddled her fingers. "Right…just give us a minute to confer!"

Charlie pulled Vaggie into a huddle. "Ok, so–like–I *know* this riddle, it's a *real* famous one, it's just that I want to think out loud to jog my memory. I'm sure I've heard the right answer to this one…"

"There *is* no right answer! Whatever you say, he's just going to say it's wrong. There's got to be some sort of trick behind the question. Think, Charlie, think!"

"I am *trying* to think, Vaggie! But *telling* me to think doesn't actually *help* me think, ya' know!"

"Well, I'm sorry, Charlie. I didn't wake up this morning expecting to be playing a life-or-death game of twenty questions! You kind of threw me for a loop here!"

"Your sarcasm is *not* helping either!"

Vaggie groaned. "Look, I'm sorry. I'll just be quiet and let you think."

"I…I'm sorry too. Okay, I think I got it. His question wasn't really about the Ship of Theseus at all. His *actual* question was, what do I *think* the answer is? If any valid answer will do, then I just have to truthfully tell him the answer I *think* is true, and it will be the right answer!"

Vaggie frowned. "What? It can't be that easy! Otherwise, why would he have all the set up about the ship, if you can just answer however you want?"

"Lots of riddles do this kind of thing. You ask one question, that seems impossible, but really, you're asking another question, with an answer so obvious, it stops being obvious! Okee-dokee, good talk, Vaggie."

Vaggie stiffened, but before she could stop Charlie, Charlie slammed her palm on the table again and blurted her answer, with adorable levels of self-confidence. "Yes. The ship is still the Ship of Theseus. That's the answer *I* think is true."

Alastor drummed his long, spindly fingers together. "But *why* do you suppose that is, Charlie? How can it possibly still be the Ship of Theseus?"

Vaggie stood, clenching her fists at her side. "She gave you her answer."

“But did she, really? I’d say she hardly put any thought into it at all.”

Charlie leaned back in her seat, and crossed her legs. “Now it’s my turn to ask you one. You’re gonna’ love it! My next one’s a real stumper!”

Alastor leaned back in his chair, mirroring Charlie’s posture, and gestured to the hourglass. “Is it? …Then why is the hourglass still counting down the seconds for your *turn*, Princess Morningstar?”

Charlie’s eyes popped open. Sure enough, there was the hourglass. “So…turn it around already. I answered your riddle.”

Flames billowed around Alastor, as he shook his head. “No, Charlie. I’m not *satisfied* with that answer. So, it doesn’t count.”

Charlie leaned forward. “That doesn’t matter. Your question was: what do *I* think? You said any answer will do, and I gave you *my* answer. It’s valid, so you have to accept it.”

“Do I? And who made that rule? Where is it written that I *must* accept your answer? Have you forgotten, Charlie? I promised you that I would make the rules for this game…And the rule is: for an answer to be correct, your *opponent* must accept it as a valid response.”

Charlie’s breath faltered. “What? But…but that’s not fair!”

“The same rule applies to me, fair and square. It’s not my fault you didn’t ask for clarification on the rules, *before* we started the game…”

Alastor tapped the hourglass, which by now had dwindled well past the half-way point. “...Tick, tock, Charlie.”

Vaggie wound up her fist and dove at Alastor. “You cheat!”

But the moment Vaggie tried to slam her fist into Alastor’s jaw, a great wave of heat erupted around him, throwing her back until she slammed against the outer wall of shadow and flame. Vaggie roared with pain as she was pinned in place, high above the floor.

Charlie screamed, then rounded on Alastor, her eyes blazing. “Vaggie! Stop it, Alastor!”

“Ah, ah, ah! Trying to win a game of wits with physical violence? That would hardly be fair play.”

Charlie dove at Alastor, slamming into his shield. “Don’t you *dare* hurt her!”

Alastor watched closely as his shield held fast, but to his surprise, Charlie resisted being blasted away as she clawed at him. “I did *not* hurt Vaggie. She hurt herself when she attacked me. If you do not attack me, she will be in no further danger. So…sit down, young lady.”

Alastor’s eyes shone, and Charlie felt a strange power of suggestion behind his gaze, like hypnosis. She had a sudden urge to sit down and apologize, like she was a toddler who’d been caught playing too rough. Charlie pulled back from Alastor, and Vaggie instantly dropped to land on her feet, gasping for air. Charlie’s fists shook as she resisted the urge to sit. To her horror, she discovered it took a deliberate act of will to *not* obey Alastor’s command. It was like being forced to hold her breath. “What’s your game, Alastor? You said a question has to have a rational answer, or it’s not a riddle!”

“And I didn’t lie. It is perfectly possible to answer my question. You simply need to make more of an effort.”

Vaggie glared at Alastor. “Then the answer has to be that it’s *not* really the Ship of Theseus any more. It’s the only other possibility.”

Alastor chuckled, then waved his hand to make a cup of tea and saucer appear out of thin air in front of him. “But that’s not Charlie’s answer. And even if it were, it would hardly be more satisfactory. Go on, Charlie, explain your reasoning. Be convincing.”

Raising his pinky, Alastor took a dainty sip of his tea.

Charlie felt her breath starting to quicken. “It *has* to be the ship of Theseus. It belonged to him. It was the same ship that bore him home. When…when a ship is damaged and needs repair, it doesn’t cease to be the same ship just because you repair it. There’s no single plank of wood that makes the ship what it is. It’s all of the separate parts, together, that makes the ship.”

“But we’re not talking about a small repair. Every single piece of the original ship rotted away. Suppose I cut off your arm Charlie…and then I gave you a wooden, prosthetic arm. You would still be Charlie, of course. But what if I cut off both of your arms? And then your legs? Suppose I cut out your heart, and replaced it with a mechanical heart? Or replaced your brain with a computer, one that perfectly simulated your thoughts, personality, and memories with artificial intelligence? Suppose I replaced every single part of your body with a machine. Would you still be you, even then?”

“That…that’s not right. I’m not a ship. I’m a person, with a soul, and a name.”

“Ships have names. Ask any sailor, and he’ll tell you that in a storm, he loves his ship more than he could possibly love any woman. Why do you think ships have always been referred to as…she?”

“A ship is still an object. If the ship of Theseus had a name, it’s because *Theseus* gave her a name. That’s why the parts that make up the ship don’t matter. What makes it Theseus’ ship is that it belonged to Theseus.”

“But Theseus is dead. And he had been dead for centuries, long before the question of his ship became the hottest topic of debate in Athens. It was the Athenians who rebuilt his ship, not Theseus. So how can it be the Ship of Theseus, if he isn’t alive to claim it as his?”

“Because it *was* his ship, historically. And he left his ship to the care of his people. They cared for his ship because they cared about *him*. Because it’s an important part of *his* story.”

“You are avoiding the central problem. Think of it this way. Suppose an enterprising sailor noticed all the old pieces of the ship being discarded during repairs, and decided that he could make a profit selling old pieces of the legendary Ship of Theseus. Let’s say he managed to gather every single scrap of wood as it was thrown away. Then, it occurred to this sailor that, if he possessed every single scrap of wood from the original Ship of Theseus, he could rebuild it, and own the legendary vessel for himself.”

“Don’t be absurd, that never happened!”

“Just *imagine* it did. Let us suppose that this enterprising sailor managed to collect *every single* piece of the original ship, over the course of many decades, and had it reassembled fully. Every last plank of wood is from the *original* vessel that bore Theseus to Crete, and back home to Athens. Now, there are *two* ships of Theseus. The fully refurbished one in Athens, and the rotting original in the sailor’s back yard. Which ship can truly be said to be the Ship of Theseus?”

Fighting to hide any sign of pain from her face, Vaggie stumbled to Charlie’s side and held her hand. “Then, it has to be the reassembled ship, made from the original wood. If the point is to preserve Theseus’ ship as a historical artifact, then that’s the real ship that belonged to Theseus. Just change your answer, Charlie!”

Alastor cooed. “Oooh, she has a point. In this hypothetical, the ship in Athens is really only a fabrication. It may be an identical copy of the Ship of Theseus, but it really has no connection to the original ship any longer. I’ll give you a chance to change your answer, Charlie…But your next answer must be final.”

Charlie hesitated, watching the seconds tick away, then shook her head. “No. They’re *both* the Ship of Theseus. In your hypothetical, the rotting pile of wood is the Ship of Theseus, but it’s *only* a historical artefact. The ship in Athens is still the Ship of Theseus, because Theseus would recognize it as his ship.”

“Theseus is *dead*. Are you going to call up his ghost to answer the question of which ship is really his?”

“I don’t have to. Because if I asked Theseus which ship he’d rather sail on a voyage, I know *exactly* which one he’d pick.”

Alastor rolled back his head and laughed. “Ah, ha ha! How simply marvelous! I hate to admit it, but that was a clever answer. I’m satisfied. It’s your turn to ask a question Charlie…”

As the timer floated into the air, Alastor tapped the glass. “By the way, the timer doesn’t stop until you finish posing your riddle. Better spit it out, Charlie!”

Charlie stammered, before Vaggie grabbed her sleeve. “A house you enter blind, but come out of with sight."

Charlie waved her arms wildly, as the last grain of sand started to fall. “Yeah! What she said! Um, can you answer her riddle?”

The timer turned over and slammed back onto the table. Alastor purred like a cat as he watched it. “And not a moment too soon! You girls are really keeping me on the edge of my seat. Very well, *Charlie*, the answer to *your* question is, yes. Vaggie’s riddle is a delightful old saw, which has been passed down to us from ancient Sumeria. The classic answer to the riddle is, ‘A school,’ for one supposedly enters a school in a state of blind ignorance, and leaves it enlightened, with their eyes full of the light of truth. Though if you ask me, the reverse is also true, more often than not. I’m sure you find my answer satisfactory, don’t you, Charlie?”

Charlie and Vaggie exchanged a furtive look, before Charlie rolled her eyes and pouted. “Um…yeah?”

Alastor settled back in his seat, and twirled his cane. “Well, since I have *so much* time to spare, I think I’ll take a moment to collect my thoughts. You girls can talk amongst yourselves, if you so please…”

As Alastor started humming to himself, Vaggie and Charlie switched back into their huddle position. Charlie waved her arms. “What was that? Everyone knows that one!”

“What? I heard it from an ancient Sumerian guy in heaven. I figured no one down here would know that.”

“He clearly knows all the classical riddles. Like, we can’t just use the riddle of the Sphyx on him. Once a riddle gets *too* famous, you can’t use it anymore!”

“Well you’re the one who tried the nursery rhyme on him! Even I’ve heard that one!”

“Okay, okay! I screwed up the first riddle! Look, that one was popularized in the 1950s. I figured it’d be too *new* for him. I’m not a brainless bimbo, okay?”

“I *did not* say you were a brainless bimbo.”

“Well–sometimes–it sure feels like you think of me as a brainless bimbo, based on the way you talk to me.”

“Well, I *don’t* think that way about you! I think you’re smart, and dedicated, okay? And you’re the one getting on my case, over the Sumerarian riddle!”

Charlie took a deep breath. “Okay. I’m sorry…again. You really saved my butt there, so thank you. I’m under a lot of stress right now, but I shouldn’t be taking that out on you. Let’s concentrate on the problem at hand. I clearly need to be the one who asks, and answers, every riddle. Otherwise, he’d have accepted your answer right away. So, let’s divide the work. I’m in the driver’s seat, and you’re riding shotgun, so that means you should focus on thinking of a really killer riddle, and let me focus on answering. If I’m starting to flounder, and you know a good answer, shoot it to me. But if we’re running low on time, *I’m* the one who has to give the final answer, so, like, try not to micromanage me…please.”

Vaggie frowned. “But how do I–”

Alastor slammed his cane against the floor. “Got it! You’re going to love this one, Charlie. It’s a real brain tickler. Fair warning, to answer this question to my satisfaction, you must be *specific*…Tell me, Charlie, how do you *kill* an angel?”

Charlie blinked twice. “What?”

The hourglass floated into the air, spiraled wildly to magically reset, then settled back on the table to signal the start of the next round.

Alastor kicked his feet up on the table, and leaned back in his chair. “I repeat: how do you kill an angel?”

“But…the only reason I challenged you to this game is because I need to know the answer to that question. You said you were going to tell me the answer anyway, after the game is done.”

“Exactly! That’s why I knew you’d find this riddle so interesting.”

Inside Charlie’s brain, a blue screen of death appeared, announcing that Charlie.exe had crashed.“But…but…”

Vaggie rushed to slam her fists on the table. “But that’s not a valid riddle! A riddle has to have a rational answer. You’re the one who said that we can’t ask questions, based on knowledge we don’t possess!”

“Correction: what I said was, if a question relies on knowledge that is *impossible* for the other person to have, that question is forbidden. This question requires a certain level of knowledge, which I might just so happen to possess, but it’s certainly *possible* that one of you could know the answer…After all, one of you *is* an angel.”

Charlie grabbed Vaggie by the shoulder and pulled her into the huddle. “Okay, Vaggie. What’s the answer?”

“I don’t know! I had no clue angels could die at all until, like, twelve minutes ago!”

Charlie held Vaggie by the shoulders.“There has to be a valid answer, or Alastor’s magic wouldn’t have permitted the question. Please, Vaggie, if you know the answer, I need you to trust me.”

Vaggie snatched Charlie’s hands away from her. “I told you, I don’t know! You really think I wouldn’t tell you, if I knew the answer?”

Charlie stood firm. “You didn’t tell me you were a fallen angel.”

“That was my business! If people in Hell knew who I was, do you know what they’d do to me? They’d tear me to shreds! If they know what…what I’ve *done*…they’d hate me!”

“Okay. You’re right about that. But I know who you are now, and I don’t hate you, Vaggie. I wish you’d told me before…but it was your secret, and your decision, not mine. If you say you don’t know how to kill an angel, then I trust you. But maybe you know something that will give us a clue. Like, what are angels afraid of?”

Vaggie calmed her breathing, glancing at the timer. They had already used up over two minutes of their time. “We…we’re all afraid of Hellions, especially the Exorcists. We pretend we’re fearless, but that’s the whole reason for the Extermination. We’re afraid you’ll grow strong enough to escape from Hell, and launch an attack on Heaven.”

“But, don’t you have, like, higher angels, who protect you guys? Like we have the Overlords, and the Seven Deadly Sins, and…well, my Dad, whenever he manages to get his act together.”

Vaggie shook her head. “No one in the Exorcists knows anything about the Higher Heavens. We’re soldiers, Charlie, and when Sera or Adam give us orders, we obey them.”

“So, angels are afraid of Hell?”

Vaggie shivered. “It’s…it’s so horrible down here, Charlie. Everyone just…hates one another. In all of Hell, you’re the only person I know who isn’t like that.”

“Why did you do it, Vaggie? Why did you leave the Exorcists? You must have killed plenty of demons without batting an eye. What changed?”

“I…I stopped believing in the mission. When I was little, I was taught to love my neighbor, as myself. I haven’t lost my faith in that. But when I was ordered to slay an unarmed child…I lost my faith in the Exorcists.”

Alastor yawned, then fidgeted in his seat to rest his elbows on the table. “Three minute warning!”

Charlie nodded at Vaggie. “Okay, you’ve given me something to work with. Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

Charlie stood and cleared her throat. “To kill an angel, we need…a powerful weapon, located somewhere in Hell.”

“That may well be correct, but it’s hardly a precise answer. I warned you, your answer must be *specific.*”

Feeling her legs trembling, Charlie returned to her seat. “Very well. To kill an angel, I need to follow these *specific* steps. First, I’ll beat you in this game. Second, I’ll learn the secret that only you know. Third, I’ll share that knowledge with everyone in Hell. We’ll all know their weakness, Alastor. You just have to choose to help us…please!”

Alastor’s frigid smile finally disappeared. He looked like a pouting child. “Nice try. But you’re just rephrasing your first answer. I’m a patient man. But sooner or later, you’re going to have to commit to a final answer. Think that one will satisfy me?”

Charlie shook her head. “No…I don’t know how to *injure* an angel, so that’s not going to work…But I think I think I know another way to kill an angel.”

As Alastor leaned his cheek against his palm, his dashing smile reappeared. “I’m all ears!”

“To kill an angel…you have to kill its faith.”

Slowly, the hourglass started to float into the air. Alastor noticed it, and scowled. “What? Oh, come on! That’s such a vague answer.”

“Is it an acceptable answer to your riddle, or not?”

Alastor harrumphed. “I was just hoping for something a little more…sensational. But it’s certainly a *valid* response, so I won’t pretend otherwise. Your turn to ask a question, Charlie.”

Charlie exhaled. “Tell me the truth. Why did you volunteer to help me manage the Hazbin Hotel…in the first place? I need to know the *real* reason.”

Alastor inspected his fingernails. “Come, come, Charlie. I told you the answer to that from the very beginning. I think your plan to save lost souls from the flames of Hell is delightfully absurd, and I want a front seat so I can watch you fail.”

Charlie shook her head. “But I don’t believe you. Therefore…I don’t accept that answer, Alastor. You’ll have to do better than that.”

Alastor’s eyes popped open, then he slammed his palm down so hard, his sharp nails sank deep into the table. “You…little…brat! This is *exactly* why I like hanging around you, Charlie. You’re always good for a laugh. Of course, if my answer is truthful, then it should satisfy your question fully. If you doubt my sincerity, neither my magic, nor my own personal code of honor, would permit me to lie to you…At least, not as an answer for this game. If it’s *not* an acceptable answer, then explain why.”

Charlie gestured to the clock. “If it was an acceptable answer, then why isn’t your hourglass doing its thing?”

Alastor tapped the hourglass impatiently, and when it didn’t budge, he forced an even broader smile. “Excellent work, my dear! The key lies in the wording of your question: why did I volunteer to help you manage the Hazbin Hotel…in the first place? You want to understand my first principles. As worded, the question prevents me from providing you with a *selectively* truthful answer. Bravo! Then I will answer truthfully: first, and foremost, the reason I volunteered to help you at your hotel is because, although I *do* think it would be hilarious to watch you fail, I *urgently* wish to see you succeed. It’s in my *political* interest to help you. You’re my ticket to the big leagues.”

Vaggie sniffed. “Must be hard, having to have dominion over a slowly dying corner of hell, as the V’s take over the media landscape...Video’s killing the radio star.”

Alastor gripped his cane so tightly, his knuckles cracked. “Yes. I’ll admit fighting a turf war with *three* separate overlords is quite a challenge. But there’s nothing more I love than a good challenge. But if you ask the V’s, they’d have to admit…none of them could take me, individually.”

Charlie leaned in close. “Then that means it *can’t* just be political for you. There are plenty of powerful demons in hell. Any number of options for you to deal with your rivals. Why us? I know I’m the Princess of Hell, and stuff, but I just want to help people. I’m not interested in any of the political intrigues and power games the demon lords like to play.”

“You may not be interested in politics, Charlie, but politics are most definitely interested in *you*. Isn’t that enough?”

“Nice try, Alastor. Now you’re the one trying to rephrase the same answer. You said it yourself. I want to know *why* you’re here. Nothing less will do”

As Alastor’s eyes widened, his smile became strangely fixed. “I am here…because more than anything…I want to be *free*.”

As the hourglass floated into the air, Charlie sighed. “Okay, Alastor…if you don’t want to tell me more, then I can’t force you.”

Vaggie gestured at the hourglass. “What? That answer didn’t tell us anything!”

Alastor gnashed his teeth. “But it was a *true* answer. And it was the *full* truth.”

Charlie shook her head. “He’s right, Vaggie. It’s my own fault for not requiring him to be more specific, as part of the question.”

Alastor nodded. “Yes, a minor misstep. But apart from that, it was a devious question…I’ll be sure to remember it, for a *long* time. Now, it’s my turn…I want to ask you about this little Hotel of yours, Charlie, and I want the *whole* truth. You say you want to see the souls of lost sinners, saved from hell? Well, here’s a little hypothetical for you…”

The smoke reappeared, forming images as Alastor began a new story. But this time, the images were so vague, Charlie struggled to make them out. “Suppose a man, a son of Adam, made in God’s own image, decided he wanted to commit murder? This isn’t a mad man. He is *perfectly* of sound mind. But purely for the sake of appeasing his curiosity, he decides that he wants to kill a woman. A stranger. Looking out the window from his apartment, he sees her from time to time, walking home unaccompanied…Sometimes late at night. He puts on his best suit and tie. He makes sure that he is the image of a perfect gentleman. And then, he waits. And the next time he sees the woman, he approaches her. He tells her that it’s not right for a lady to be walking home alone at this hour, and offers to see her safely home. She delicately refuses, but…he smiles warmly. He practiced the smile, you see, just to make sure it looked right. It had to be…natural. He bows, and politely insists. The woman accepts his offer. He walks her home, leaves her his business card, and asks for nothing in return. A week passes, and the woman continues to pass by his window…in fact, more often than before. He hails her again. She recognizes him. Delicately, she asks if she might impose on his gallantry yet again, and have him act as her escort. He agrees, and as they walk, they talk to one another. About their hopes. Their dreams. Their desires…”

Charlie and Vaggie glanced at the hourglass. It was still Alastor’s turn, but he was letting it dwindle dangerously close to the end of his time.

“At long last, the woman invites the man into her home. It’s in a remote part of town…a poor neighborhood. And when they are finally alone, the man holds the woman close to him…he kisses her on her neck…”

Aslastor stroked a finger along his own neck, his smile gone, his eyes vacant. “...and then he rips out her throat with his teeth. When the deed is finished, he tears out her heart, and eats it. He cuts the body to pieces, so that they can be safely hidden in a briefcase. Once he’s cleaned himself off, he carries the remains to a remote part of the state park, to bury them. Then he walks home, wearing his best suit and tie. And when he gets home…he decides he’d love to do it all over again…and at that very moment, as he looks out his window…he spots a small child, playing alone…”

Charlie and Vaggie held their breath as they saw the last few grains of sand start to fall.

Alastor smiled. “...How can a man like that *possibly* be redeemed?”

At the last second, the hourglass spun, and the count began again.

Charlie swallowed. “Well…Alastor. I believe that redemption is possible. That’s why I started the Hazbin Hotel. If…if that man wasn’t sorry, if he didn’t want to repent, I don’t think it would be possible for him to find redemption. You have to want to be better.”

“That’s not a proper answer to my question. I didn’t ask you why he *might not* be redeemed. I asked you how he could *possibly* be redeemed? You say redemption is possible? How?”

“He…he could say that he’s sorry?”

“Ah, yes. I’m sorry. Sorry I murdered your wife. Sorry I murdered your children. My bad. Won’t happen again. By the way, they tasted delicious!”

“I mean a real apology! Not just words. If…if a murderer really repented, if he understood that what he did was wrong…then maybe we could help him.”

“Help him *do what*, precisely? Of course, you can’t make him repent, if he doesn’t want to. But let’s assume, for the sake of the argument, that he’s really, truly sorry. Now what? What becomes of him?”

“He…he still has to pay the penalty for what he did. If he committed murder…saying he’s sorry doesn’t bring back the people he killed.”

A black mist surrounded Alastor, creeping out slowly to fill the room. “Then, there’s no hope? Once you cross the rubicon…there’s no going back. From that moment on, the only way to go…is *onward.*”

Charlie shook her head. “No. No, I *will not* believe that. He may not be able to undo what he did, but the answer to evil can’t be doing *more* evil.”

“Perhaps in life…but that life is over. Now we are all trapped in this world. Trapped here with you, Charlie. You know, I almost envy you…you were born in Hell. You have no idea how different it is here. And from your vague answers, I can already tell…you have absolutely no clue how to answer my question, don’t you Charlie.”

Charlie glimpsed at the timer, then at Vaggie. Vaggie only shrugged. Of course, not even the Exorcists knew the answer to her question: why do some souls go to Heaven, while others go to Hell?

Charlie took a steely breath. “The rules of the game is that your question has to have a rational answer…which means there has to be an answer.”

“And what is your answer?”

Charlie sat up straight, trying to make herself the spitting image of a perfect Princess. “My answer is…I *don’t* know.”

“You’re admitting defeat?”

Charlie shook her head. “No. I’m answering honestly. I don’t know if it’s possible for that man to be saved…but if it *is* possible for that man to be saved, then the only way it’s possible is if he *repents*.”

“And then what? You see the problem, don’t you? Just because he’s sorry, that doesn’t mean he deserves to go to Heaven. What’s the answer?”

“I *don’t* know.”

“Then you’ve given up.”

“No Alastor. I don’t know the answer to your question. But I know there *is* an answer. And I *will not* give up until I find it.”

Alastor chuckled. “Sorry, Charlie. But I won’t accept that answer.”

Then, the hourglass floated slowly into the air. Alastor, Charlie, and Vaggie all stared, equally astonished. With a petulant frown, Alastor tugged at the hourglass, then strained, unable to budge it. “No! That’s not possible! I refuse to accept it! It can’t be true!”

As his hair flew wildly out of place, Alastor slammed the crown of his cane against the hourglass. The jeweled radio-mic ornament that decorated it cracked, but the hourglass held

firm in midair. Alastor tore at his hair. “No! I made the rules for this game! Me! This is my realm! Here, I am a slave to no one else. Here, I *alone* am the master!”

Vaggie grabbed Charlie by the shoulder, “Charlie! We still need a new riddle!”

“Crud! Okay! Whisper, whisper, whisper! No eavesdropping, right, Alastor?”

At that moment, Alastor was beating his fist against the hourglass, spitting with rage, spouting quotes from antique literature Charlie didn’t recognize. Charlie nodded. “I think we’re good. Any ideas, Vaggie? I’m tapped out.”

“He clearly knows every riddle you know from reading books. What we need is a screw ball. We just need to ask the right question!”

Charlie slammed her fist into her palm. “What Would Bugs Bunny Do?”

Vaggie face palmed. “No! Not that! Be sneaky. What’s the kind of riddle the hero pulls out of his ass at the last moment, to stump the villain?”

Charlie pulled out a locket on a chain necklace. “Um…what have I got in my locket?”

Vaggie’s mouth drooped. “Wuh? That’ll never work. He has to accept it as a valid riddle, according to his bull shit rules!”

Charlie stroked his chin. “Hmm, I dunno…I think the way he cooked the rules might be playing against him. That question about how to kill an angel was pretty sneaky. Oh! I’ve got it! He said that, if a riddle is based on having knowledge that is *impossible* for the other person to possess, that riddle is invalid! All we have to do is convince him that it’s possible for him to guess what’s in the locket. But how do we do that?”

Vaggie held out her hands. “I–I dunno! What’s in the locket?”

Charlie’s eyes went wide. “Um…that’s kind of a personal question?”

“Charlie! We have no time! If you want my help, you have to trust me!”

Charlie nodded, slapping the locket into Vaggie’s palm, then turned away, blushing madly. “Okay, okay, I trust you.”

Vaggie flipped open the locket, to find a picture of Charlie with her mother and father on one side of the locket, and a picture of her and Vaggie on the other side of the locket. “This…this isn’t going to work Charlie. He could guess this right with one try…or rules-lawyer us with some other kind of answer.”

Charlie nodded. “Exactly. That’s why the wording of the question is so critical. I’m going to ask him what, *specifically*, I have in my locket. That way, it’s not enough for him to give a vague answer. He has to nail it!”

Vaggie nodded along with Charlie. “Okay, okay, I can work with that. Give me just a second. I’ve got an idea.”

Vaggie turned, and hunched over, fiddling with the locket. Charlie stiffened, and reached to snatch the locket from Vaggie. “Hey! What are you doing to my locket? That’s a family heirloom!”

Vaggie shook her head, carefully opening the locket. “You’ve gotta trust me! Just let me concentrate, this will work!”

Charlie was tempted to snatch the locket back, but at that moment, on pure instinct, she decided to trust it to Vaggie, for a few precious seconds. “What will work? We’re almost out of–”

From behind them, Alastor’s voice cracked like a whip. “You *do* realize I can clearly hear every word you’re saying right now?”

Charlie spun, and froze as she saw Alastor seated at the table. The hourglass was still floating in the air…but was down to its last few grains of sand.

Vaggie slammed the locket into Charlie’s palm. “Locket!”

Charlie thrust her arm forward to show Alastor the locket. “What have I got in my locket? And be specific!”

Alastor chuckled. “Oh, Charlie. I’m so disappointed in you…I don’t accept that as a valid riddle.”

As if in slow motion, the last grain of sand tumbled to the bottom of the hourglass. It seemed to echo through the room. Alastor smiled again, not his frozen smile, but his true smile. “I win the game.”

Stiff as a statue, Charlie continued to hold the locket up. “But…that’s not fair. I asked a question, before the timer ran out. It’s a real riddle, with a real answer!”

“By having me guess? Shame on you, you naughty girl. You know very well that a riddle must be *solvable*.”

“Well…suppose I let you have three guesses?”

“You’re asking me to treat a probability problem as a riddle? Intriguing. Had you made that offer before the timer ran out, I might have been inclined to play that game. But, alas, you’ve lost.”

Vaggie clenched her fists. “No! You promised to be fair! It’s my fault Charlie ran out of time, not hers!”

Alastor interlaced his fingers. “Wah, wah, it’s not fair! Well, it most certainly *is* your fault Charlie lost, Vaggie. And it most certainly *is* fair. The question she asked was against both the rules, and the spirit, of the game. By the Law of the Deep Magic…I win.”

Forcing a stiff smile, Charlie spoke through her gritted teeth, still frozen. “Hold on…you just said you’d go for it if I gave you three guesses…What’s the matter? Afraid you’ll lose?”

Alastor snapped his fingers, and with a poof, Charlie was suddenly wearing a sky blue dress. (In case you were wondering, yes, the dress looked *exactly* like the ones from the trad-wife Wojak internet memes.) Then, Alastor snapped his fingers again, and with another poof, Charlie was wearing an apron, decorated with a lipstick kiss and the words, “Spank the Cook!”

Alastor yawned. “No, because I *never* lose. Incidentally, my first guess *would* have been…Two photographs. One of you and your parents, with you as a young child, and as for the other…a photo of you along with the lovable gaggle of weirdos you’ve managed to gather together at the Hazbin Hotel. Tell me…was I close?”

Charlie side-eyed her locket, a bead of sweat on her brow. “Um…you’re getting warmer?”

Alastor threw up his hands. “Well, it’s now a moot point. I’m claiming my prize.”

Vaggie stood between Alastor and Charlie. “No. I won’t let you take her.”

Charlie shook her head. “You can’t stop him, Vaggie. I made the deal myself, fair and square.”

Vaggie spun back and forth, her eyes desperate. “Then…then let *me* make a deal Alastor! You were ready to take the three guesses. Just let me ask the question for Charlie! Double or nothing! If I win, you count that as Charlie’s win. But if I lose…you get to take me too.”

Charlie did a double take, still frozen in the same pose. “No, Vaggie! Don’t throw your freedom away!”

Vaggie turned to Charlie, holding up her hands as if in prayer. “You have to trust me, Charlie! I have a plan! I can do this!”

“Intruiging…but I’m afraid I don’t value your soul nearly as much as I value Princess Charlie Morningstar. Don’t worry. I’ll take *good* care of her. She’ll learn to be a proper, respectful, submissive housemaid, and learn some *long-overdue* life lessons. I’ll even let her visit the Hazbin Hotel, from time to time, so long as she promises to…*behave* herself.”

Vaggie felt tears welling in her eyes. “But…but if you’re so sure you’ll win, why not play the game? What have you got to lose?”

Alastor bowed slightly, gesturing first at Charlie, and then at Maggie. “But I *do* have something to lose. You’re asking me to gamble a cherished treasure, so that I may win an amusing toy as my prize? The stakes are entirely uninteresting.”

Charlie swallowed. “Then let’s raise the stakes. We agreed to a term of seven years of service. If you win, you get me…forever.”

Alastor twitched. “...Forever?”

Vaggie’s eyes started to pop. “...Forever?”

Alastor straightened his posture, his smile gone. “And if I lose, then I’m your *employee* for all eternity? No deal. A temporary term of service is one thing, but I will *not* gamble with my liberty.”

Charlie smiled sweetly. “Nope! If you lose, all you have to do is honor our *original* deal. Your bet was seven years of service. I’m raising my bet to eternity. Don’t you see, Alastor? For you, it’s a complete win-win.”

Alastor’s smile returned. “...It *is*, isn’t it?”

Vaggie clutched at Charlie’s apron strings. “Charlie, are you crazy? That’s *way* worse!”

“You told me to trust you. You said you had a plan, right?”

“Well, yeah, but–”

“Well, I *do* trust you, so if you have a plan, then let’s make it work.”

“But…but if I screw this up, then we’re both his handmaids…forever!”

“Vaggie, do you trust me?”

Vaggie sniffled, as she forced herself to hide any sign of tears. “Y-yeah?”

“Well, if you can put your trust in me, and I can put your trust in you, then that means you can trust yourself. Go for it, Maggie! Take the locket!”

Alastor cleared his throat. “As adorable as this entire soap opera is, there’s still the matter of the rules of the game. By raising the stakes, you’ve caught my interest. But I want to make sure we’re all clear as crystal on the rules. I don’t want to hear any complaints about how it’s all so ‘Not fair!’ every time I have to put you two across my

knee…It'd spoil all the fun! So, Vaggie, just to clarify…you're going to ask me the *same question* that Charlie was going to ask me?"

Just as she was about to take the locket from Charlie, Vaggie hesitated. "Er…I was gonna' word it a bit differently?"

"How curious. Yet, *however* you plan to word it, the riddle is fundamentally the same. I am to guess the contents of the locket, and be given a certain amount of guesses?"

"Yeah. That's right."

Alastor held up three fingers. "How many guesses are you offering me? Three?"

Vaggie bit her lip, but before she could answer, Alastor cut her off, humming to himself. "Hmm…such a short game. Suppose you let me have as many guesses as I want, until the timer runs out. Wouldn't that be so much more fun?"

Charlie gulped. "Um…Vaggie?"

Vaggie looked Alastor right in the eye. "And why would I do that? Think I want to waste six minutes of my life watching you squirm?"

Charlie shook her head more fervently, her body still frozen in place. "Hey, Vaggie! Can we pow-wow?"

Ignoring Charlie, Alastor strolled toward Vaggie, and bent low to reach her eye level. "According to the deal Charlie has offered, this game is all or nothing. A single riddle. That puts me at a disadvantage. Ordinarily, I'd get the chance to ask *you* a riddle. I think it's fair to give me more than three guesses, don't you?"

Charlie rocked her head back and roared. "Hang on! He's up to something! I don't know what it is, but there's something screwy going on here!"

Vaggie pursed her lips. "Until the sand on the timer runs out, for your turn?"

"Yes. Once Charlie's turn ends, my turn will instantly begin. Then I would only have six minutes to answer your riddle."

Vaggie shrugged. "Sounds fair to me."

Charlie bit her lip. "Bad idea! Bad idea!"

Vaggie patted Charlie's immobilized hand comfortingly, before taking the locket. "Charlie, it's cool, I've got this."

Alastor hummed, as he righted his chair, and sat back down at the table. “Vaggie, darling…I don’t particularly like you, but I don’t particularly *hate* you, either. Given that you’re putting *your ass* on the line this time, I think it’s only fair to warn you…”

He leaned forward, and as his scars reappeared, his black, deer-like horns started to twist and grow. “...I think I *already know* the answer to Charlie’s little riddle. Still want to play my game?”

Charlie’s eyes teared up. “Vaggie…please…”

Vaggie and Charlie shared a long, pregnant pause. Finally, they both nodded, and Vaggie turned to face Alastor. “You’re on.”

Flames erupted from Alastor’s chair, and they were again enveloped by hellish green fire. As Vaggie glanced down, she noticed she was wearing a modest church dress and an apron, decorated with the words, “Hell’s Angels’ Kitchen Girl.” Vaggie clutched furiously at the garments as she read the words splashed across her adorable, itty-bitty-titty-committee-style tomboy boobies.

Alastor drummed his fingers on the table. “Oh, hope you don’t mind. I thought a change of costume would make this more entertaining. Ask your question, fallen angel.”

Remembering her years of intense martial arts training, Vaggie steeled her breath, and held up the locket. “Fair warning…to answer this question to my satisfaction, you must be *specific*. If I open this locket for you, what will you see?”

Alastor hummed. “A secret?”

When Vaggie only shook her head, Alastor adjusted his seat, making himself comfortable. “A memory?”

“I said you have to be *specific*.”

Alastor smiled. “Two photographs.”

“Not good enough.”

Alastor pointed his cane at Charlie. “Earlier, when I asked Charlie if the locket contained a photo of her with her family, and a second photo of her with you, and all her other little friends at this hotel, including myself, she said I was getting warmer. Of course, that could have been a bluff, so just to be sure…is that the answer?”

Vaggie shook her head, smirking. “Nope. You’re getting cooler!”

“...Tell me, Vaggie, do you think you and I are all that different?”

“Is that your idea of an answer to my riddle?”

“No. I’m just curious…when you helped slaughter the people of Hell during the Exterminations, was it purely out of a sense of duty…or did you enjoy it?”

“I’m not playing your game, Alastor. It’s my turn to ask the questions, not yours.”

Alastor’s smile widened, his eyes hungry. “Yes. You have *no* idea just *how right* you really are.”

“You’re just trying to get under my skin, hoping to slip me up. Better hurry, radio-head, you don’t have all…day?”

As Vaggie glanced down at the table, she noticed the hourglass hadn’t moved. A single grain of sand hovered in the top glass, defying the laws of gravity. “Huh? What’s wrong with the hourglass? You’re supposed to start your turn.”

Alastor shook his head. “No…it’s still *Charlie’s* turn, remember? My turn only starts when hers ends.”

Charlie rolled her eyes. “Then start your bloody turn already!”

Alastor stroked a finger along the hourglass. “When I win this game, the first thing I’m going to teach you is how to *listen very carefully*, when I am speaking to you. Vaggie, you interrupted my game with Charlie. You agreed to take her place. Mercifully, I agreed to suspend the rules I put in place, to give you a fighting chance. Charlie’s turn has not ended, and will not end until the final grain of sand has fallen from this hourglass. Therefore, my turn cannot start.”

Vaggie shook her fist, then tried to leap forward to pummel Alastor, only to half-stumble over the long, flowing dress. “You rat! I’ll shove that hourglass right up your–”

As Vaggie tripped, the flames billowed all around them. Charlie screamed as she saw Vaggie engulfed in flames. “Vaggie!”

But Vaggie emerged, unharmed, and found herself seated at the table and chair across from Alastor. As she checked herself, Vaggie looked up to see Alastor looking her dead in the eyes. “I’ve changed my mind…you’re really starting to grow on me, Vaggie. I have to admire your *spunk*…and I can’t wait to *spank* it out of you.”

As the flames grew higher, the hotel seemed to disappear around them, and all of them started to float on air, Charlie still petrified in the same pose, while Vaggie and Alastor were still seated at the same cozy table and chairs. Then Charlie and Vaggie finally realized…they were not

flying. They were *falling, d*eeper, and deeper, into eternal shadow, and eternal flame. Then, all the ambient sound of the rushing flames vanished around them, though they still billowed eerily.

As Vaggie clung to the table for dear life, the locket seemed to dangle floating in the air as they entered free fall. Alastor reached across the table and pinched it, lovingly, between his fingers. “This locket contains two photographs. One of Princess Charlie Morningstar with her family: her father, Lucifer Morningstar, the Prince of Darkness, and her mother, Lilith, the first wife of Adam. The second photograph…is of you and Charlie. Just the two of you. That’s the answer, isn’t it, Vaggie?”

Fighting for breath, Vaggie twisted her wrist to pull the locket away from Alastor, and caught it neatly in her palm. “No! That’s *not* the correct answer to my riddle!”

Alastor’s eyes went wide, before his eyes softened. “Liar, liar, pants on fire. Oh, Princess Charlie…”

Charlie emerged from the flames, and came to rest next to them at the table, still holding her absurd pose. Alastor gestured to Vaggie. “I know you heard my answer. Tell Vaggie what’s in the locket. I think she’s…confused.”

With an act of will, Charlie forced herself to rotate in mid-air, still frozen, to create the illusion she was banging the table with her permanently outstretched fist. “No! I’m not helping you!”

“You and I are playing a game of *honor*, Princess. Vaggie is playing the game on your behalf, but you’re still the judge of an acceptable answer to your own riddle. You *have* to answer, or forfeit the game. Is *that* the answer to your riddle?”

Charlie seemed to be struggling with something caught in her throat, before she was forced to spot out the answer. “Yes! That *was* the correct answer to my riddle!”

“Then I have won the game.”

Charlie roared. “Clearly you haven’t! Or your hourglass would stop the game!”

On cue, the hourglass emerged before them. Unlike everything else, it wasn’t falling. It seemed to be fixed. Immovable. As if it was the only thing left in the universe that remained straight and true.

With a snarl, Alastor snatched at it, before pulling his hand away, his palm scorched by angry burns. “That makes no sense. I don’t know how, but you’re cheating my magic. *Someone* is helping you! Who is it?”

The single grain of sand seemed to shine, like a four-pointed star, nearing blinding them all.

Vaggie shook her fist, the chain of the locket waving wildly. “We are *not* cheating! And you’re not answering *Charlie’s* riddle…you’re answering *my* riddle!”

With a snarl, Alastor closed his right hand around the hourglass, desperate to shield his eyes from the blinding light. As the flesh on his hand started to sizzle, then catch fire, Alastor flinched. But as he grit his teeth into a broad smile, he leaned across the table to look Vaggie in the eye. “The secret must be in the wording of your question…I remember now…‘If I open this locket for you, what will you *see?’* Those were your exact words! That means it has something to do with sight! Beauty! Enlightenment! That sort of sentimental twaddle!”

Vaggie shook her head. “Nah. Can’t say I’m the romantic poetry type.”

As the skin on his hand started to sizzle, then boil, Alastor’s head twitched.“A trick! That’s all it is! Some childish trick! But I have time…Do you understand? I’ll keep you here for as long as it takes. If I have to guess every possible word, in every possible language, in every possible combination, I *will* have my answer.”

Vaggie and Charlie shouted the same words at the exact same time. “Well, then you better get fucking started!”

Ignoring them, Alastor twisted to examine his free hand, the burning flesh of his right hand now starting to melt, and crumble to ash. “My answer was the correct answer for Charlie’s riddle. That means the locket *must* have contained those two photographs…”

Alastor seethed as he examined his own fingers, his eyes bulging, but his smile unchanging. “...Before Vaggie *did something* to it! That’s it, you threw them away! There’s nothing left in the locket! *The answer is nothing!”*

Charlie stuck out her tongue. “Pfft! Duh, no! Vaggie would *never* do that! She told me I could trust her with my locket! Am I right, Vaggie?”

Fighting every instinct to cling to the table for dear life, Vaggie reached out and grabbed Charlie’s frozen hand in hers. “Damn right, Charlie!”

The single grain of sand shone with a fresh burst of intense light, burning away the last of the skin on Alastor’s arm, leaving behind a skeletal hand that had already started to crack from the heat of the hourglass. At long last, Alastor howled with agony, his jaw seeming to unhinge as the stitches that held it together snapped, but even in the midst of his suffering, he kept his smile.

“Then you put *something* in! A lock of hair? A ring? It’s the two photographs…and…and *something!* Is that right? Answer me!”

Vaggie forced a smile. “Nope. You’re getting colder!”

As the rest of his flesh began to melt away, revealing only a skeleton within, Alastor roared back his head, and laughed. “There *has to be* an answer! There has to be an *answer!* Answer, answer, answer! That’s it! The locket is a *metaphor!* The locket *is* the riddle! When I open the locket, I will see…the answer! The answer *is* the answer!”

Vaggie nearly lost her grip on the table and chairs, and knew in her bones that if she didn’t hold on, she would fall forever, into nothingness. Vaggie forced a smirk. “Nope! Same bullshit, different smell!”

As half of Alastor’s face burned away, the skull underneath seemed to smile with glee. “The rules were clear! There has to be a *rational* answer. It has to *have* a solution! I *know* what was in it! You didn’t take anything *out!* You didn’t put anything *in!* It’s not *logical!* It’s not…it’s not *fair!* I will be the master of my own soul! I will bow the knee to no one else!”

As Alastor’s bones started to turn to dust, he fixed his eyes on the light contained within the hourglass, and instantly, they erupted in white flames. Grabbing the hourglass with both hands, Alastor strained to move it. “No…I know you are, now…I–I *hate* you! I hate *everything* you’ve made! I hate you…for making *me!”*

Four beams of light erupted from the hourglass, traveling up, and down, and left, and right, in every direction, into infinity. Charlie and Vaggie shut their eyes tight, and even then, the light shone red, then bright white, even past their closed eyelids.

Alastor wailed, before closing his left hand around the hourglass, as the last of his flesh burned away. He bellowed with rage until his voice finally cracked, and became more like a childish scream. With all his might, he butted his head against the hourglass, until his skull cracked, and his horns snapped off and burned away. “No, my heart *will not* be conquered! Leave me *alone!* Get out, get out, get oooouuuuuuut!”

Then with a final ferocious tug, Alastor seemed to smash the hourglass through the table, cracking it cleanly in two. But even then, the hourglass didn’t seem to move an inch. It was as though the entire universe was what moved, before smashing against the hourglass.

Instantly, the flames and darkness vanished, and the hourglass lay broken on the floor. As it rolled, a single grain of white sand dropped, and lay alone on the ground.

Trembling, Alastor held up his hand, and saw that his flesh was fully restored. “What…what happened?”

Still wearing their trad-wife dresses and aprons, Charlie and Vaggie blinked, then glanced at one another. Vaggie scowled at Alastor. “That wasn’t you? I just thought you were trying to get in my head with the skeleton stuff.”

Charlie glanced at her frozen fist, and wiggled her fingers. “Oh, sweet! I can move again! Yipee! I’m so happy to be alive!”

Alastor clutched his face, and finally noticed he could see again. “But…the game…we have to finish…the game?”

Charlie stretched her arms. “If I remember correctly, my turn ends when the last grain of sand has fallen from the hourglass. So that means my turn is over. Your turn, Alastor…oh, wait…you broke the hourglass…and my Mom’s tea table. Not cool.”

Alastor dropped to his knees, reaching for the smashed remains of the hourglass, only to cut his finger on the broken shards of glass. “It can’t be…that hourglass cost me a fortune…it was supposed to be…unbreakable.”

Vaggie shrugged. “Welp, you broke it. And weren’t you the one who told me it was against the rules to use violence? I’d say you just lost the game.”

Charlie groaned. “Ugh! *I* just lost the game!”

Vaggie sighed. “No one plays that game anymore, Charlie. I’m officially giving you permission to stop playing it.”

Alastor snapped to his feet, examining the droplet of blood on his own finger. “No, that can’t have been a fair riddle. You cheated, somehow! Show me!”

Vaggie scowled, and pulled the locket away from Alastor’s reach. “I’m not showing *you*…It’s Charlie’s locket. If she feels like telling you what’s inside, that’s her business.”

Charlie nodded as she held up the locket, her eyes shining. “Um, I am *not* accusing you of cheating, Vaggie…but how the hell did you do it?”

Vaggie stuffed her hands into the pockets of her apron. “See for yourself.”

Charlie flipped open the locket. “Ooooh….So simple, and yet, so elegant. That’s my favorite kind of solution to a riddle!”

Alastor tore at his air. “What is it? Tell me!”

Charlie flipped the locket round. “She just flipped the photos backwards real quick. So *that’s* what you were up to when you were fiddling with it! Even if he correctly guessed the two photographs, that’s not what he’d actually *see*, if you opened the locket for him.”

As Alastor glanced at Vaggie, his hands twitched. “But that’s absurd! The photographs were in the locket the whole time? And that *was* one of my answers! The first rule of the Riddle Game is that the riddle has to be solvable!”

Charlie waved a finger. “Ah, ah, ah! In the first place, you *agreed* to a guessing game. So even if the riddle *was* a violation of the first rule, you still willingly accepted the deal anyway. But it’s *not* a violation of the first rule of the Riddle Game. You had all the information you needed to solve the riddle. You already had guessed what was inside it. You figured out that nothing was taken out of it. You figured out that nothing was added to it. You gave yourself infinite time to solve it…you just couldn’t deduce the only correct answer, before the clock ran out.”

“Because I didn’t say I’d see the *backs* of two photographs? A minor technicality!”

Charlie pointed a finger gun, and booped Alastor’s nose. “Which you agreed to…on your honor.”

Alastor blinked twice, stared vacantly at the broken hourglass, and finally straightened his posture. His cane appeared out of thin air, and he put on his most charming smile. “Very well. I admit I am vanquished. For the next seven years, I am *officially* an employee of the Hazbin Hotel. Now that you actually have to start paying me, we’ll have to discuss my salary–”

Charlie pinched Alastor by his cheek, cooing sweetly. “Oh, no you don’t! Our deal was, any order the winner gives the loser, which does not violate the moral conscience of the loser, the loser agrees to obey. But you don’t have to obey the order. It’s purely on the honor system!”

Alastor sighed. “Very well. Then here is your first prize. The answer to the question…how do you kill an angel?”

Alastor snapped his fingers, and a tongue of green flame encircled his and Charlie’s heads like two halos, before they vanished in a puff of smoke. Charlie’s eyes shone green, before she turned to Vaggie. “Oooh…Alastor, you jerk! You didn’t really know the *actual* answer. But it’s a good lead. Vaggie, he gave me info that can save the hotel, but we're going to need help. The angels can be defeated, and Carmilla is the key.”

Vaggie scowled. “What? Carmilla Carmine?”

Charlie nodded. “She killed an exorcist in the last extermination. She knows how they can be harmed. I need you to go to her, convince her to teach us. If she can, we might have a chance.”

“With just the seven of us?

Charlie rubbed her temples. “No, we're–ugh, we're going to need numbers too.”

Alastor appeared at Charlie’s side. “And I know just who can help. As long as Charlie can be her normal, charming self.”

Charlie looked up at Alastor with genuine affection. “What's that you said about smiles?”

Alastor patted Charlie’s head. “Good girl.”

Vaggie whispered in Charlie’s ear. “Charlie, can we talk about this–”

Charlie held Vaggie’s hand. “We can talk later. Right now, we have a job to do. You with us?”

Vaggie sighed. “Ugh. Fine.”

As Vaggie left, Alastor appeared at Charlie’s side, pulling her into a half hug. “All that’s left is to rally the troops to hold back an entire host of nigh-invincible, holy exorcists, all armed to the teeth with Angelic weaponry. I imagine your first order will be to have me on the front lines, where I am needed most?”

Charlie gently brushed Alastor’s hand off her shoulder. “About that…now that you’re officially my flunkey, we need to have a talk about your attitude. I’m not happy with the way you badmouth people all the time, or try to get them to sign demonic contracts that sell their soul to you. It’s simply not nice! I expect better from my employees.”

Alastor giggled. “Eh, heh. I’m not under any *legal* obligations to obey your orders, Princess Morningstar. Especially not where it concerns my business interests.”

“True, but as long as you’re working for *my* business, under *my* roof, you’re going to need to make more of an effort. And that starts by fixing your attitude.”

Alastor glanced at the door. “Of course! I will strive to be a model employee. But…shouldn’t this conversation wait until *after* we’ve rallied the troops?”

“Nope! You’re my ace in the hole, Alastor. Getting your butt in line is my number one priority right now. The end of the world is nigh! And the only way for me to stop the coming apocalypse, and save as many people as I possibly can…”

Charlie pinched Alastor firmly by the ear. “…is to give you a spanking, right now!”

Alastor yelped, and reached for his ear, but Charlie’s grip was unbreakable. “But…but that’s absurd! It’s a minor punishment for children.”

Charlie shook her head. “For children? Oh, gosh no. Spanking is strictly for consenting adults. So, I’ll need your consent now.”

As Charlie tugged his head down lower to reach her level, Alastor giggled nervously. “Charlie, whatever has gotten into you? This is so…unlike you. You’re usually so…delightfully helpless?”

“This was *your* idea, Alastor. You said it yourself. I run a tight ship. If spanking is good enough for me and Vaggie, it’s good enough for you.”

Alastor’s smile finally became nervous. “Oh, dear? You took that joke seriously? Of course, I wasn’t planning to abuse you and Vaggie. I wouldn’t *dream* of it. It’s just that…well, you and Vaggie are *women*, you see.”

Charlie nodded, beaming. “Uh huh! We are!”

Alastor nodded along with her. “...And…and I’m a *man.”*

Charlie nodded faster. “Yup! You are! …So, are you ready to honor our agreement, or not?”

Still gritting his teeth, Alastor sucked down a long, slow breath, then fixed his hair. “Very well…let’s just get this over with.”

[End of Chapter 1]

Chapter 2: The Spanking Game

> Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.
> —Jesus of Nazareth, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Chapter 7:7-8.

As Charlie dragged Alastor along with her by his ear, the Princess of Hell smiled sweetly. “That’s the spirit! We may be on a tight schedule, but I don’t want to do a rush job. This is a big day for you, Alastor! We’ll start with a little warmup, to get you more acclimated.”

Charlie seated herself on her bed, and unbuckled Alastor’s belt with a click. Alastor’s eyes popped open as he heard his own belt being tugged out of the loops of his dress pants. “H-hold on, Charlie-dove, we never really had a chance to discuss the particulars for this deal. You know, important things like mutual–”

With a clean yank, Charlie tugged Alastor’s pants down to his ankles, revealing his simple, striped boxers, typical of men’s fashion in the 1920s. “–boundaries?”

Charlie nodded briskly, her face positively radiant as she reached around to pat Alastor’s bottom. “You’re absolutely right, Alastor! Your consent is essential for this spanking to have any positive effect on you. Let’s think of this as a trust exercise! I think if you bare your own butt, it will help you face what’s coming, and take a more active role in your own rehabilitation. Would you like to undress for your spanking?”

Forcing a smile, Alastor stood stiff, desperate to pull up his own pants, but painfully aware that if he did, he would lose face and respect. As a well-read scholar of philosophy, Alastor’s immediate thought was that he was now like Burdian’s Ass: torn equally between the choice of covering his own ass and baring his own ass. Neither option seemed particularly dignified. “...I would rather *not!”*

Charlie patted the back of Alastor’s hand, her eyes sympathetic. “Oh, Alastor, are you too frightened to move? You look like a deer in headlights.”

Alastor narrowed his eyes. “Don’t condescend to me, Charlie Morningstar. I fear nothing. Through the force of my will, I can overcome any trial you can throw at–”

Charlie yanked Alastor’s boxers down to join his dress pants, exposing his lithe, supple, yet distinctly masculine buttocks, then tugged him forward so that he stumbled across the bed and flopped down over her left thigh. “Don’t worry, Alastor. Since this is your very first spanking, I’ll

help you get through this as quickly and painlessly as possible…huh, now that I think of it, is this your very first spanking?"

Alastor was taken by surprise, and immediately tried to stand up. He was convinced that, in a head-to-head fight, he could easily overpower Charlie Morningstar, even considering her impressive heritage. But despite her slight frame, Charlie was moving much too quickly for him to keep up. "That's none of your business! I don't have to tell you–"

Charlie landed a firm spank across the lower center of Alastor's backside. "That's okay, Alastor! You don't have to tell me anything about your past if you don't want to. Just know that, if you ever need someone to confide in, I'm always here to listen! I may be your official boss now, but I will always be your friend!"

Alastor jerked as he felt the first spank, but clenched his teeth to resist the urge to make a sound. "This is entirely unnecessary, and a waste of our time. We should concentrate on more important matters, such as–"

Charlie landed two spanks, first to Alastor's left buttock, then his right, before she fell into a steady pattern of slaps. Already, she had found the perfect rhythm to keep Alastor's full attention. "This is very important, Alastor. Despite all the crummy stuff you've done, you are still a person, and I believe you matter."

Alastor took a deep breath through his nose, and steadied himself. Over the decades, he had learned to endure far worse than this. "If you care so much, then you should release me, and we can forget all about our little misunderstanding. I assure you, I will be the most capable employee you could ever ask for. There's no need to resort–Ah!–ahem–no need for such brute methods."

Charlie distributed her spanks more evenly across Alastor's buttocks, trying to cover the entire available surface area with cheerful, pink handprints. "I know you're going to do a great job from now on, Alastor. But I'm not spanking you because you're a bad employee. I'm spanking you because I want you to be a better person. I want to help you."

Alastor practiced controlled breathing, as though he was running a marathon. "And who asked for your help?"

"Uh, you did? When you asked me to spank you?"

Alastor clenched his fists until his black gloves creaked. "I did *not* ask for this treatment."

Charlie paused. "Oh, shoot. Are you withdrawing consent? I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you to quit so early."

His eyes twitching, Alastor snorted like a bull. “I am *not* quitting. This…beating…is nothing more than a light tickle compared to what I can endure. My *point* is that this is a meaningless exercise.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay, got it. I’m not spanking hard enough for this to have any impact. Thanks for telling me, Alastor. I really admire your determination.”

Just as Alastor was about to lift himself up, Charlie landed the next spank, and fell right back into her steady pattern, as though nothing had interrupted her. This caught Alastor off guard, and he forgot to practice his steady breathing. “Aha! Charlie, let’s discuss this like–ack!–Aha, *discuss* this like adults. You must see–hee! Hee, hee. Oh goodness, Charlie, do stop this nonsense…s-stop!”

Charlie’s hand froze in mid air, her wrist bent at a graceful angle above her head. “Oh, shoot! You stopped it again? Are you struggling, Alastor? Let’s stop now.”

Alastor clenched his teeth, fighting to catch his breath. He didn’t want to stand up too quickly. He wanted to compose himself first, and look completely unbothered, before he faced Charlie. “Yes, yes, I’m sure you’ll see things my way. We can talk this out. With me by your side, the Hazbin Hotel is sure to succeed. After all, I think of you as the daughter I never had.”

Charlie examined Alastor’s bare butt closely, wondering if she had been spanking too hard. “Really? I always thought of us more as an older cousin, younger cousin duo? You know, we’re both feisty and get on each other’s nerves, but still have each other’s backs when the chips are down.”

Alastor lifted himself carefully, trying to mentally plan out the best way to redress himself that would look sufficiently poised and dignified. He settled down off the bed onto his knees, trying to at least preserve some of his modesty from Charlie. “Yes, yes, however you want to describe it! Just, stop this spanking nonsense.”

“Don’t worry, Alastor. We’re done. Do you want ‘stop’ to be your safe word from now on?”

Alastor snapped his head up to face Charlie. “My *what?*”

While standing, he was a few inches taller than Charlie (not counting his pointed ears, which helped create the illusion he was over seven feet tall). But while kneeling, he couldn’t help but notice Charlie Morningstar’s impressive, 6-foot-two-inch build as she now towered over him. As she stretched her fingers, Alastor noticed the palm of her hand was now bright pink.

Charlie blew on her palm, then glanced at Alastor. “You know, your safe word. The word you use to say when a spanking is too much to handle, and tell me when I need to stop. Frankly, ‘stop’ is a really good one. It’s one syllable, and every one knows what it means.”

Alastor's smile twitched. "I don't *need* a safe word."

Charlie shook her head. "No, Alastor. Everyone needs a safe word. *I* need it because I want to respect your boundaries. And *you* need it because it protects you, if the spanking gets to be too much for you to handle."

"Don't mock me. I can handle anything you can dish out. I…am…a man!" As Alastor stood to his full height to tower over Charlie, he smiled wickedly, before he noticed he forgot to pull up his boxers.

"Oop!" said both Charlie and Alastor at once. Instinctively, Alastor covered his front with both hands.

Charlie shielded her eyes as she twisted to face away from Alastor. "Don't worry! I didn't see anything!"

Hissing, Alastor quickly bent down and roughly tugged up his boxers and dress pants all at once. "Are you quite finished, Princess Morningstar?"

Charlie nodded, holding up her hands to act as a screen. "Yup! That's all you need for the warmup. Let's finish discussing safe words."

Alastor quickly fixed his pants, ignoring the uncomfortable wedgie he'd accidentally given himself in his rush to redress. Without his belt, his dress pants sagged to reveal a peek of his striped boxers, front and back. "Yes, please, let's do. You seem to be laboring under a mistaken impression. I do not fear torture, Charlie Morningstar. Pain is an illusion. I will *not* accept being spoken to as if I am a child. That *is* a violation of my principles."

Charlie peeped to see if Alastor is dressed, then twisted to face him, folding her hands primly between her knees. "I understand. You are not a child Alastor. I will make every effort to speak to you respectfully. The whole point of this deal was that, regardless of who won, we would respect the loser's agency."

Alastor sighed. "Yes! Finally, you understand. I am not a plaything. Though I *have* pledged my service to you, you would do well to remember that I am still a demon Overlord. To treat me like a little boy–I mean–as a plaything, is an insult to the spirit of our agreement."

Charlie looked at Alastor with polite attentiveness. "Ok. Mutual respect is key. So…what does this have to do with safe words, again?"

"It means you are thinking about the power you hold over me *irrationally*. I am not only a powerful weapon in your arsenal. I am a symbol. Sooner or later, the rumors of my…my oath of *fealty*…will reach the furthest corners of the Seven Circles. Every power in Hell will be paying close attention to you, Charlie."

“Really? Maybe we can tell them about the Hazbin Hotel rehab program!”

Alastor waved a hand, “Yes, yes, *helping* people. Sugar, spice, and all things saccharine. But my point is, if you want to make the proper impression on a demon overlord, you have to speak to them in a language they understand.”

“English? French? Spanish?”

Alastor slapped the back of his hand against his palm. “Fear. Power. Brute force. The only language they understand is strength. So, if word ever got out of this…ahem, this nonsense about the spanking, it would damage your credibility.”

“Don’t worry about that Alastor. I have no political aspirations. I just want you to feel like you’re being shown the respect you deserve.”

“Grand. Then lets talk about torture. Say I displease you. If you want to make a proper example of a servant, the punishment for failure must be steep. Degradation. Torture. Death. You must be absolutely *ruthless* with me, or you aren’t showing me the respect I deserve. People must speak of my fate in hushed voices, so that my triumphant return to power will be all the more grand.”

Charlie nodded. “Got it. So, I’m like, your football coach, who’s gotta be really tough on you, and make you memorize the whole playbook, but that’s okay, because we still respect each other, and you want someone to give you that push you need to kick ass on the field.”

“That is…directionally correct. So…when you punish me…I want you to be *creative*. I don’t want you to stop, just because I beg you to stop, because I *will not* beg.”

“Um…but if you *do* beg me to stop?”

“If that happened, which it won’t, then it would be your right to inflict still greater torture upon me, as punishment for my disgusting weakness. Be *grusome*, Charlie. Be *outrageous*. But for the love of God, please don’t treat me like I’m a naughty child.”

Charlie swallowed. “Gosh, Alastor. This is pretty heavy stuff. You’re asking a lot of me. You want, like, actual torture?”

“Of course I don’t *want* to be tortured. The point is that *nothing less* than torture will suffice for a demon overlord. It’s a matter of saving face, for both of us. And that means *absolutely no* safe words.”

Charlie shook her head. “Sorry, Alastor. I understand this reputation stuff is really important to you. But I’m the boss, and I say safe words are non-negotiable. Even if it’s only for

emergencies. If it makes you feel better, you can pick another one. Is there something you can think of that means ‘stop,’ but…sounds cooler when you say it?”

Alastor groaned. “If you insist…‘Spare me.’ Simple, direct, elegant enough to the ear.”

Charlie pointed to her skull. “That’ll work. Ding! I made a mental note. Now I’ll never forget it! Now, about this torture stuff…what are your limits.”

“I *have* no limits. My willpower is greater than any physical obstacle. You want to put me in my place, Charlie Morningstar? Then be creative. Just *imagine* the things I was going to do to you, and unleash that on me, ten fold.”

Charlie blew out a long, whistling breath. “Okay. Your safe word is ‘Spare me,’ but I’ve got to be really tough, and not hold back. Basically, I have to come up with the absolute, most bananas torture that’s ever been devised for you, or I’m not showing you the proper respect you need to feel valued as my friend? Are you sure that’s what you want…er, I mean, what you *need?”*

“Yes. It’s what my *pride* demands.”

Charlie stood up, nearly eye-to-eye with Alastor. “Okay, Alastor. I’ll try my best.”

Then, Charlie snapped her fingers, and with a poof, Alastor’s clothes transformed into a 1920s sailor boy outfit. As he noticed the suit, Alastor’s smile vanished, if only for a single second.

Charlie snapped her finger toward her mirror and dresser, holding her nose high. “Alastor, I’m so disappointed in you. You have been a very *naughty* little boy, and now you have to be punished. You march your tail straight over to the dresser, and fetch me the wooden hairbrush. I’m going to spank you, right on your little, bare bottom!”

Alastor’s eyes twitched. “What are you doing?”

Charlie put her hands on her hips. “I’m doing my duty. I may not be your mother, Alastor, but as long as you live under my roof, I’ll treat you like I would my own son. And that means, I’ll spank you, as often as I have to, when you need it.”

Then Charlie held her hand up to whisper, as if she were a ham actress in a Broadway musical theater production. “Psst, Alastor, that’s your cue!”

“But I don’t *want* you to spank me!”

Immediately, Charlie got back into character as a firm maternal figure. “Well, too bad! You should have thought of that before you misbehaved. No one wants to play games with a sore loser, who cheats to win!”

“But I *didn’t* cheat!”

Charlie held up a hand, then gestured to the broken remains of the table and chairs. “No more excuses! We both know you have this coming. And just look at the mess you made. Do you feel proud of yourself? Throwing a childish temper tantrum, at your age?”

“Hold on–that was–”

Charlie put a hand on Alastor’s shoulder, and reached around to pop him one across the seat of his pants. “No more stalling. If you want to be a big boy, then be brave, and take your spanking.”

Alastor yelped, and shielded his bottom as he hopped into the air. “Eep! But…you *can’t* do this to me!”

As Alastor rounded on Charlie, his scars and stitches slowly began to reappear. “I won’t allow it…I will not be…mocked!”

Charlie stood her ground, seemingly unbothered by Alastor’s unsettling form. “Alastor? Do you need to use your safe word? Remember, it’s ‘Spare me!’”

Alastor blinked, and his form returned to normal. “What? No! You’re still on that? Haven’t you listened to a word I’ve said?”

Charlie nodded. “Yup! I learned my lesson about not listening to you during the Riddle Game. You said that you need me to think of the most twisted, evil form torture I could possibly think of, and be absolutely merciless, or it would be an insult to your dignity. And you also said that, whatever I do, I should not *treat* you like a child who still needs spankings, because that would be an insult to your dignity. So, the best way for me to torture you, and not insult your dignity, is to treat you like a child who still needs spankings.”

“But *that’s* an insult to my dignity!”

“Exactly! It’s the single worst torture I can imagine up for you. (That’s why you need the safe word, see.)”

“I don’t *need* a safe word!”

Charlie wiped her brow. “Phew, okay. In that case…That does it! You just earned yourself a *second* spanking! And if I have to drag you across my knee, I promise it will be much, much worse for you! Last chance to shape up, little mister. I want you to grow up to be an *honorable* man, and that means you have to learn to take responsibility. Go on Alastor. You know *exactly* what you need to do. Be a brave boy, and bring me the hairbrush.”

At the mention of the word “honorable” Alastor froze, and he finally comprehended his situation. In order to preserve his pride as a demon…he would have to sacrifice his pride as a man. In all his time in Hell, it had never occurred to him that the two distinct prides could ever be in conflict with one another. Alastor stood to his full height, and made his decision. But he had already made his decision long ago: he was not a man, he was a demon.

Alastor found his smile again. “Very well. I’ll *play* along.”

With a graceful turn on his heels, Alastor tried his best to stride to the dresser, but as he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he couldn’t help but notice the dramatic effect was destroyed by his boyish sailor suit.

Ripping open the top drawer, Alastor snatched up the wooden hairbrush, and stomped to face Charlie, who had taken her seat on the side of the bed again. As Charlie held out her hand, Alastor let the hair brush drop with a careless flick of his wrist. Charlie had to scramble to catch it, and narrowly avoided fumbling it. Alastor’s eyes popped open for a moment, before she put on her serious face. “Shame on you, Alastor. That was very impolite. I *already* gave you your last warning. Now, I’m afraid I’ll have to be strict with you.”

Charlie snapped her fingers, and with a poof, Alastor’s sailor suit and undergarments disappeared, though at least he still had his birthday suit. Alastor quickly covered his front, before Charlie snatched his wrists and stood to face him. “Nope. Hands behind your head.”

Feeling the full truth of his nakedness, Alastor concentrated on his smile. It was his last defense, but it was the only one he needed.

Charlie sat back down, then smoothed the fabric of her trad-wife dress and apron across her lap. “Okay, Alastor. Why do I have to give you a spanking?”

“To torture me.”

“Wrong answer. I’ve been thinking about one of your riddles…the one about the man, who killed and ate people. Who was he, really?”

“That was a hypothetical.”

“Was it *merely* a hypothetical? Or was it based on a true story?”

“My story was *inspired* by real events. The Axeman of New Orleans. I have an academic interest in historical serial killers. It’s a hobby.”

“Tell me the *whole* truth, Alastor. Were you a serial killer, before you died?”

“Yes. I broke Jack the Ripper’s record, you know?”

“And are you sorry, for what you did to those people?”

“...I refuse to answer this question, as a matter of principle.”

“What principle?”

“Mine own, and no one else’s.”

“So be it, Alastor. I won’t make you say more. Are you sorry for anything you did today? The way you acted during the game with me and Vaggie?”

“I’m sorry I lost.”

“I see. I can’t change how you feel inside, Alastor. But maybe I *can* help you feel some of the hurt you inflict on other people, at least on the outside.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you Charlie?”

“Nope. I don’t enjoy this one bit. But I’ve been doing some thinking. Whether or not “the man from your riddle” is sorry for what he did…there’s still a price to pay for what he did.”

“And a paltry spanking is supposed to act as that penalty? It changes nothing, Charlie.”

“Maybe it doesn’t. It certainly doesn’t undo any of the hurt you’ve caused. But maybe it gets you thinking a bit harder about your choices. So that if we ever *do* find a way to save sinners from hell…you’ll actually be ready to listen.”

Charlie patted her lap firmly. “I’m going to have you lie across my lap this time. I won’t be able to pin you down if you struggle. So you’ll have to be a *good boy*, hold still, and take your licks. Bottoms up, young man.”

Alastor crawled onto the bed, then lay across Charlie’s lap. He found it strangely…soft. “Do you worst, Charlie Morningstar.”

Charlie raised the hairbrush high. “No, Alastor. I’m going to do my best.”

As Charlie brought down the hairbrush with a shuddering crack, she was immediately impressed by the difference the weight of the hairbrush made. She could actually see how it sank deeper into Alastor’s taught gluteus maximus than her hand ever could.

Alastor focused his mind. To resist torture, a determined spirit can create a mental picture: an imaginary palace of the mind, where pain does not exist.

Of course, the brain still *senses* the painful impulses. But the deeper you go inside the mind palace, the more distant that pain seems to be. That pain is happening to *someone*, certainly. There is no denying it exists, in some sense. It just doesn't exist for *you*. Not inside *your* world, at least.

In Alastor's mind palace, he sat on a throne of blood, his long-lost black wings fully restored, and spread wide to cast a shadow over an infinite field of skulls.

The result of this was, from Charlie's perspective, she seemed to be hammering Alastor's buttocks with absolute savagery, yet he was not only quiet, but seemed to lie unnaturally still. Though the ripples of the impacts traveled through his buttocks, he didn't so much as clench his glutes reflexively.

Charlie glanced at the back of Alastor's head, then back at her main target, trying to focus on using the full motion of her arm. She thought of Vaggie's endless training sessions in mixed martial arts and weapons fighting, and found herself suddenly grateful. This was a workout.

Inside Charlie's inner world, her mind palace, things were a bit different. Charlie's mind palace was full of fluffy puppies, kitties, and bunny rabbits. But she also had built up a solid library of music, art, and literature. In Charlie's mind palace, she was pacing nervously around her room, catastrophizing. "Agh! What's going on? Why do I suck at this? I'm such a wussy! I'll never be able to get this Hotel to work! Who am I kidding? No one respects me!"

Suddenly, her dad, Lucifer Morningstar, fell out of the closet, buried in a pile of rubber duckies. Her dad sat up, spat out a rubber, and raced over to hold her hand. This was about as high as he could reach when he wanted to give her a comforting gesture, given that Charlie had gained a full foot on him during her last growth spurt. "Charlie! Baby! Honey! Don't you ever give up."

"Daddy? What were you doing in my closet?"

"Counting the ducks. But, look, Char, now that I'm finally out of the closet, we need to talk. I know we disagree about this whole hotel project of yours, but if *you* believe in it, then I want you to give it your absolute best shot, because it's *your* mission. Just…just remember: not everyone wants to be saved, okay?"

"Wow! Thanks, Dad. Got any more fatherly advice for me?"

"Always tip your waiters. And remember, if you ever feel like you screwed up, just think of how your old man is directly responsible for introducing sin to the world, thereby making me indirectly-but-still-morally responsible for every single act of depravity and moral atrocity committed in human history…But as long as I know you're out there, kicking ass, I know there's at least one good thing in this crazy, mixed-up world of ours, that I didn't manage to screw up."

Charlie wiped away a tear from her eye. "I…I really appreciate that, Dad."

Lucier opened the door of Charlie's bedroom door, oblivious of the infinite void he was about to step into. "I love you, Apple Pie. I'm going to go count more ducks. I think I spotted a few of the buggers hiding in the bathroom."

Charlie reached to stop her dad, but could only manage to grab onto his styling top hat. "No, Dad! Wait! You wandered into my mind palace again!"

Lucifer Morningstar howled as he dropped like a stone, along with a cartoon whistling noise that lasted for a full twelve seconds, until he slammed against the bottom of the bottomless void with a resounding thwack. "...I'm okay!"

Charlie snapped out of her mind palace, and understood. Of course! She had a job to do, and whining about it wouldn't help. And even if she *did* screw everything up, at least she could try her best to make things right. And the only way to do that…was to take Alastor down a notch. But even at that moment, Charlie wasn't angry. After all, Alastor was the only Demonic Overlord who'd ever volunteered to help her in her mission to help others.

As Charlie delivered the next resounding thwack, Alastor felt a jolt. And within his mind palace, something knocked him off his dark throne, and flat onto his face, ass in the air. "Huh, that sounded like it hurt someone. Welp, sucks to be him. Lucky for me, reality is only an illusion, which the small-minded seek to impose upon my–"

Another smack of the hairbrush snapped Alastor back to reality, his mind palace crumbling. "Shit!" screamed Alastor.

Pinning down Alastor's waist with her free hand, Charlie delivered four ferocious spanks in quick succession, with perfect follow through on each swing. "Don't! Use! Naughty! Words!"

Alastor's head jerked as he keenly felt each smack. "Ow, ow, ooow, *ow!"*

His mind racing, Alastor twisted to look at Charlie, only to see the hairbrush come crashing down on him like a crashing wave from the Noahic flood. Alastor flinched, reflexively looking forward and shutting his eyes tight. "That's enough! You've made your point!"

Charlie shook her head, and carried on the spanking without skipping a beat. "Are you sorry?"

"No! No I'm not!"

"Spanking's not over then!"

Alastor snarled as he felt another swat. "You can't *make me* feel remorse!"

"Maybe not, but I'll settle for making you feel sorry. Or feel sore, at the very least."

Alastor tried to concentrate his breathing, but without the mind palace, he knew that would only buy him a few minutes of steady pain. Alastor had learned one thing about torture: the torturer *always* wins in the end. Both the body and mind were delicate, breakable objects. He had already resigned himself to that fate before his torment began. But his mind palace had been his key: his *spirit* would not be broken, at the very least.

Alastor hissed. “I’m *not* sorry!”

But Charlie only carried on spanking. “Okay.”

“I will *never* be sorry!”

“You don’t know that. Forever is a long time.”

“There’s no point to this! There’s no point to anything!”

“I don’t think you really believe that. Like, maybe you *say it*, because you really think it sounds deep. But you don’t *act like* a person who thinks there’s no point to anything you do. I kind of got the impression you had some sort of big mission you were working towards. Is that pointless too?”

Alastor slammed his fists into the mattress. “Maybe it *is* pointless. But if I want *my life* to be a pointless pursuit of power, purely for its own sake, then it’s still *my* choice!”

“Okay. But if you ask me, it kind of seems like a whole lot of work to do a whole lot of nothing. Do you remember your safe word? It’s–”

“Spare me your lectures!”

Charlie paused the spanking. “Oh, crap! That’s the safe word!”

Alastor’s head shot up. “What? No! I’m not begging you for mercy. I will not grovel!”

Still holding the hairbrush high, Charlie shrugged her shoulders slightly. “Okay.”

Then Charlie started spanking again. Taken off guard, Alastor roared, then slammed his face against the mattress. “This proves nothing! Your Hotel *cannot* work, Charlie. It’s all pointless!”

“Maybe it is all pointless. But on the slim chance it *isn’t* all pointless, I’m gonna keep trying, until I see if there’s a point at the end. Are you sorry yet? My arm’s starting to get pretty tired.”

Alastor’s voice melted into sobs, and he pummelled his fists and feet against the mattress. “I’m not sorry! I’m not, I’m not, I’m not!”

Slowing her pace slightly, Charlie landed three particularly hard whacks to the center of Alastor's buttocks, before switching back to her original relentless pace, and concentrating on his upper thighs. "Well, I can't make you sorry."

"Just stop! If you know you can't change me then just stop!"

"You're safe word is, 'Spare me!'"

"I will not break!"

"I'm not trying to break you, Alastor. I'm trying to help you. This is why we needed it. I need to be a stern maternal figure, so that means I'm supposed to spank you until I think you're really sorry. But if you're not sorry, then your only other out is the safe word."

"What? There's no end? That's insane!"

"We made a deal, Alasor, and your terms were very clear. I don't know whether you're my friend, or whether you're my enemy, but either way, I still *respect* you…even when you behave like a naughty little boy."

Alastor screeched, his voice growing shaky. "Aaagh! Y-You call *this*…respect?"

"No, I call this, 'Getting your just desserts.' You've hurt a lot of people, Alastor. How do you think your actions make them feel?"

"I know *exactly* how my actions make other people feel. I don't *care* how they feel. It's my *choice* to hurt them. That's why I do it."

"Then why don't you make *other* choices?"

"Because I don't want to!"

"...Okay." Charlie carried on spanking for a few seconds, then expertly switched her grip on the hairbrush, using the bristled-side to carry on at the same blinding pace.

Alastor squealed as he felt the strange new sensation. It didn't hurt as much. Rationally, he understood the reason why, right down to the physics. The bristles were a softer material. More yield, less yowchiness.

Yet somehow, the prickle bristles *felt* worse, and deep in his guts, Alastor felt something go tight. He felt so painfully *childish*.

And then, Alastor felt tears starting to build in his eyes. "No, Charlie! No, no, no, no, nooooo!"

He writhed and squirmed atop Charlie's lap. If he'd tried to struggle earlier, he might well have broken free of Charlie's hold, but he'd burned through most of his energy already. Charlie paused for only a moment, to get a firm grip on Alastor's back, guiding her knee up to let him bounce up and right back down into place where she needed him, and carried on the spanking. "Yes, Alastor. Yes, yes, yes!"

"Just stop it! Stop, stop, stop! Please!"

"Either say you're sorry, or use your safe word. 'Spare me,'"

Alastor hissed, then spat to avoid saying the safe word by mistake. "Sss! Sp…sptt!"

Charlie landed a hard clap across the center of both butt cheeks, which had suffered the most damage by far. "Hey! Don't spit! That's bad manners, buster!"

"Fuck you!"

"As soon as we're through with the spanking, I'll have to wash your mouth out with soap."

"I'm not sorry! So I won't say it!"

"What if you were just a *little* bit sorry? Could you say it then?"

"For what?"

"I dunno. For killing innocent people?"

"No one is innocent! You, of all people, should understand that."

"You know what I mean. Killing people who hadn't done anything to you. Sure, maybe they did some bad things to other people. Maybe they were downright nasty. But who gave you the right to decide if they live or die?"

"I did! I determine *my* truth!"

"So, can someone just decide to kill you?"

"If they *can*, then let them!"

"See, this is why I started the Hotel. That attitude is exactly what needs to get fixed. And if I can fix your attitude, maybe I can help fix other people."

“You can’t just fix people Charlie! That’s the mantra of every battered housewife. ‘I can fix him!’ ‘I love him!’ ‘I deserve to be hit!’ That’s what you’re doing!”

“To be honest, I kinda feel more like the wife-beater in this situation? I was really guilt-tripping about it at first, but I’ve got to say, my views on corporal punishment are evolving.”

“Just end it, Charlie! I won’t break! You can’t win…you can’t…” Alastor’s head slowly slumped to the mattress, and he started to weep freely.

Charlie carried on for another few moments, before gradually slowing down. Finally, she stopped, and let Alastor sob, his tears staining the sheets beneath his face. “Are you sorry, Alastor? For anything you’ve done?”

Alastor snuffled. “I…I’m sorry for damaging your Mother’s tea table, Charlie. That was…ungallant on my part.”

Charlie glanced at the table. “Hmm. I was pretty ticked at you for that before. Well, we haven’t managed to convince you that, ‘Murder is bad.’ But I suppose we have to start somewhere. Up you get, Alastor.”

As Charlie lifted him up and sat him down across her thigh, Alastor quickly covered his exposed manhood with both his cupped hands. Alastor flinched as he felt his weight rest on his aching hindquarters, and unconsciously rocked his head to rest on Charlie’s shoulder.

Charlie hugged Alastor, and wrapped her arm around the back of his head, to pat him right behind his drooping, fox-like ears. “There, there. Spanking is all over. In the future, I hope you decide to be a good little boy. But if you forget, you’re going right back across my knee for a reminder.”

His eyes fluttered open, and he whimpered. “You’re…you’re not through with me?”

Charlie shook her head. “Of course not. I’m not giving up on you, Alastor…Oh, you mean am I through spanking you? I think we’re good for today, don’t you?”

“I…I…I can’t bear this, Charlie. I’m not a little boy! It’s not the pain…it’s…it’s my…”

“It’s your *pride!* That was the deal, remember? Do you want to back out? I won’t judge you.”

“No! I *can’t* back out! It’s a matter…of honor. I *can’t* admit defeat.”

“Sure you can. What was all that about you choosing your own way, and stuff? Just choose to be *okay* with being a loser.”

Alastor whinged, fresh tears spilling down his face. “But…I’m *not* a loser!”

“I’m not calling you a loser, Alastor. I’m saying you should want to be a loser. I’m saying you should *be okay* with being a loser, for now. It doesn’t have to be forever. And if doing this makes you feel like a loser, you can stop any time.”

“H-how?”

Charlie beamed. “By admitting you’re a coward, and chickening out of our deal…or by being a good little boy! See? You always have a choice! Now, stand up. Hands behind your head.”

To his shame, Alastor felt his knees shaking as he stood, and he blushed as he uncovered his front.

Immediately, Charlie turned her face away, and with a snap of her fingers, Alastor’s sailor suit reappeared. Alastor glimpsed to examine his new suit, and discovered to his chagrin that his boy-shorts were barely enough to cover his behind.

Charlie clapped her hands, as if dusting them off. “Okay, last matter of business. I promised to wash your mouth out with soap. Since you were kind of a brat during your first spanking, I think I’d better add a time out too. Hopefully the message will sink in, and we won’t have to repeat this any time soon.”

“W-what message?”

“That you don’t just get to do whatever you want, to whoever you want. Or rather, you sure can try, but don’t complain when they *respond* accordingly. I didn’t like having to do that, Alastor…but…you literally asked for it. Huh. I am starting to sound like a wife-beater, aren’t I?”

“Y-you…I’ll get you for this…seven years isn’t that long, Charlie…and when I’m free…”

Charlie nodded. “What is freedom, Alastor?”

Alastor tried to steady his breath. “To serve no one else.”

Charlie stroked her chin. “Hmm. Sorry, Alastor. I’m not satisfied with that answer. But, we’re in a rush, so we’ll have to cut the philosophical side of this discussion short…Hey, waitaminnit…”

Charlie fumbled in the pocket of her apron, and pulled out a bar of Angel-brand soap. “Aw, sweet! You really do think of everything! I feel like I would be the world’s best stay-at-home mom just by wearing this thing!”

Taking a step back, Alastor shook his head as Charlie approached him with the soap bar. Charlie held it up to his eyes. “Alastor, be a brave boy. I know you can do it.”

Alastor stared at Charlie's throat. As his smile slowly returned, he imagined sinking his teeth into her neck. But as he looked into her eyes, his hungry smile changed. Finally, he looked a little like his old, sarcastic self again. "Yes, Mommy."

Charlie pressed the soap bar against his lips. "Ahem. Open wide!"

Alastor pouted, before finally opening his mouth to accept the soap bar. Charlie pointed to the corner of the room. "Now put yourself in time out. Face in the corner…Hmm…and one last thing."

Charlie snapped her fingers, and Alastor's short sailor pants were yanked down, as if by two invisible hands, to just below his bottom. Charlie examined her work, and whistled. "Phew! That's definitely going to leave a mark. I'm sorry, Alastor. I think I was a little too hard on you."

Alastor tried to speak, but the soap bar muffled his words. "Noo-moo-weermpht."

Charlie blinked, then snapped her fingers. "What's that? Hold on…Go ahead, Alastor."

The soap bar popped out of Alastor's mouth, and hovered in midair, menacingly. "...No you weren't…I deserve far worse…"

"Well, I choose to show you mercy. Anyway, I'm going to try and rally a few more people to stop the extermination…maybe practice my speech? Gosh, I hate crowds. I'm trusting you to put yourself in timeout, Alastor. I'd say about…fifteen minutes, tops? If only we had a timer…oh, hey! Check it!"

Charlie spotted the hourglass amidst the wreckage of the table, but something was off. It was fully restored to its original, perfect state. Charlie spun the hourglass, and giggled as she watched it float in mid air. "You were right, Alastor. This thing is unbreakable…woah, so cool. Okay, two turns of this, and you're out of timeout. I guess I'll let you off with just twelve minutes. Think hard about the person you want to be, okay. Maybe you choose to be an evil son of a bitch after your seven years of service ends, but whatever you choose…I just want you to remember that you *had* a choice."

Alastor stared in horror as the hourglass floated, then came to rest in the corner, right in front of his face. No matter which way he turned, he couldn't escape it. He would be forced to watch every individual grain of sand, counting down the seconds of his imprisonment.

Then the door of Charlie's room slammed open, and the rest of the Hazbin Hotel gang appeared, led by the femboy spider-demon, Angeldust. "Charlie? Vaggie just ran out of the hotel, wearing a dress and an apron! What the fuck is going…on?"

Angeldust trailed off as he spotted Charlie, admiring a bare-bottomed Alastor in the corner. “Hi, Angel! We’ve got a plan. We are canceling the apocalypse. Alastor, when your time out is done, come find me. I’ll need you in my corner if I’m ever going to master the art of public speaking.”

Angeldust watched Charlie race past him, out the door, then down the hall. Angel dust smirked as he glanced at Alastor. “Nice ass, Alastor. That color really suits you.”

As the rest of the members of Charlie’s squad charged after her, Alastor watched another singular grain of sand tumble from the hourglass.

“*This…This is Hell…”* thought Alastor.

The End?